夕顔

ヒカルが地球にいたころ……②

Yugao
When Hikaru was on the earth

野村美月
イラスト◉竹岡美穂

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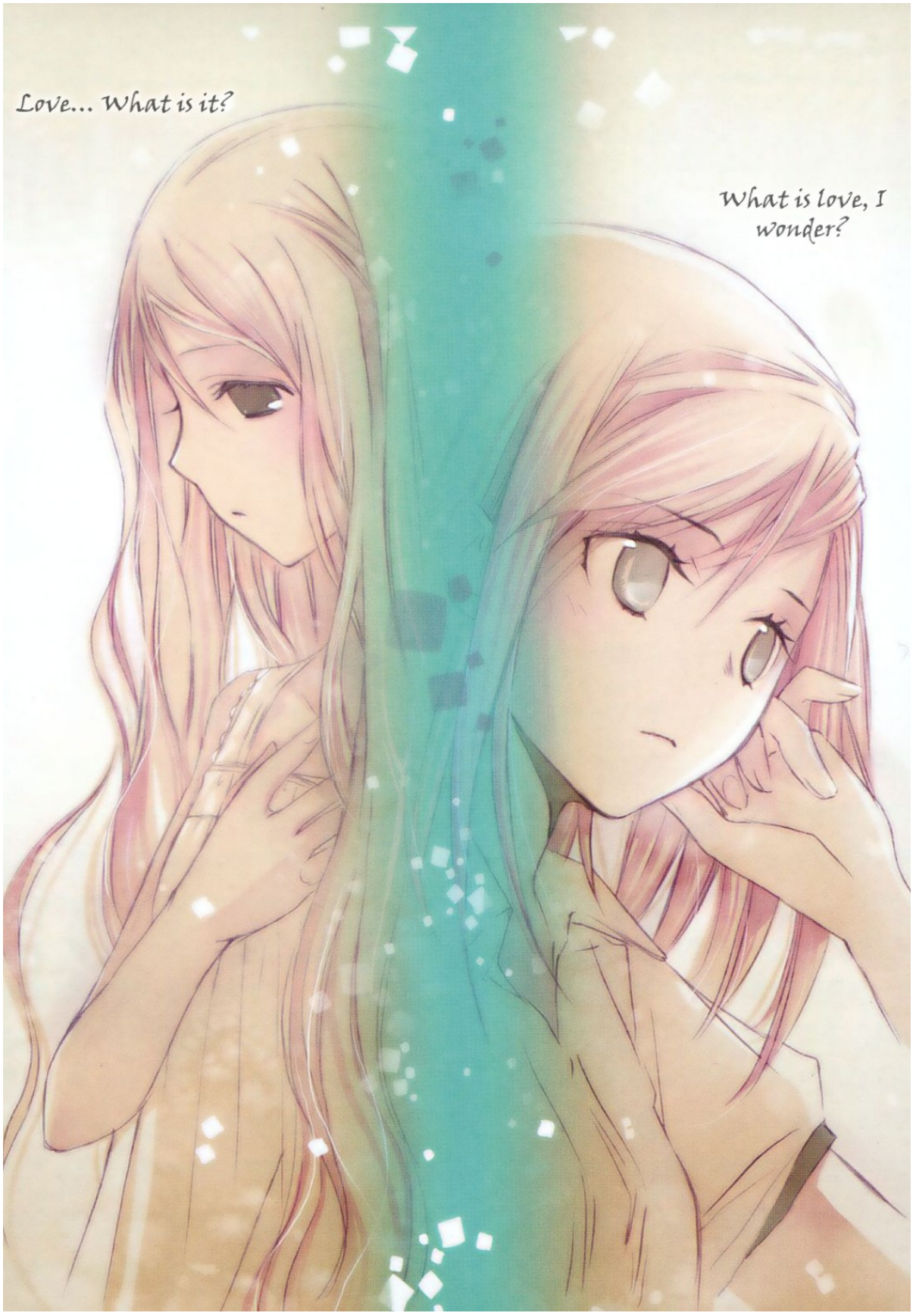
Pain... Sadness... those are things happening
in the world far away...
In this world, it doesn't even matter if...
I don't use an umbrella...

Mr Akagi,
others are
saying that
you're the top
suspect in the
murder of
"Your Hikaru".
Hiina Oumi


Love... What is it?
What is love, I wonder?

「お兄ちゃんが、ヒカルのお友達……なの？」
——ってまさか、こいつが次の〝心残り〟の相手なのか！

Chapter 1 - It's Already Troubling When You Faint.

“Flowers drenched in the rain are truly charming and fascinating. It really gives off a vibrant array of emotions.”
Hikaru spoke from Koremitsu’s side, his voice gentle.
If that sighing voice was to have an aroma, its elegant fragrance would spread through the humid air of that rainy day.
“The pale blue flowers carry such sweet dew, and the Commelina Grass works so hard to prevent them from falling; the Iris continues to look regal as its delicate body stands proudly; the Hydrangea dressed in water crystals looks so pure and dainty as it gives off a rainbow-colored light—these flowers look exceedingly alluring throughout the rainy season.”
The rainy season had come early; dark clouds loomed above even in the late of May.
Koremitsu walked to school on the pavement that morning.
He carried a dull, dark blue umbrella, and strode forward with an arched back. Hikaru floated at his side without an umbrella.
The school uniform was composed of a white blazer and slacks. This opulent and slick design contrasted starkly with Koremitsu’s gruff personality. It gave the appearance of a fine haute couture when worn on Hikaru.
“Koremitsu, don’t you find flowers and girls to be more mysterious and alluring on rainy days? Whether it’s their tender lips under the umbrella or their delicate neck, white limbs and exquisite hips, those are all so enchanting. The blouses of the uniform drenched by the rain are transparent, showing the lines of their underwear, making hearts race. The fragrance of shampoo from their drenched hair is also worth marveling at, and causes one to inadvertently close his eyes to enjoy, you know?”
“…Not at all.”
Koremitsu retorted with a bitter tone.
“Why would you smell a girl’s hair without a good reason? Are you a pervert?”
Being thought an oddball by his fellow students for talking to himself was an ever-present worry for Koremitsu, so he had refrained from answering Hikaru; however, he could not stop himself from retorting to Hikaru’s prattling of the relations between flowers and girls on rainy days.

“You pervert, harem prince, flower idiot, hook-up devil, self-indulging guy, perverted delusional dreamer, big liar, con artist.”
Even as Koremitsu scolded Hikaru, he attempted to keep his voice low enough to avoid being heard by others on their commute to school.
Hikaru complained with a pained expression,
“That hurts, Koremitsu! Why are you so unhappy?”
You’re asking me why I’m so unhappy?
Koremitsu glared at Hikaru; his eyes were sharp enough to terrify other students, even without glaring.
“Do you need me to tell you why, you lying ghost!?”

Right, Hikaru Mikado was a ghost.

This was why he could go about with no umbrella on rainy days and not be affected.
His shirt was invariably dry and clean, and his blazer constantly a sparkling white; his light brown hair swayed smoothly across his petite, feminine face.
The death of Hikaru, the boy heralded by the school’s students as a Prince, occurred a month ago.
Koremitsu had attended his funeral.
That was a mistake.
It was at that funeral where he found himself haunted by Hikaru’s lingering presence, his ghost.
“I promised the girl I’m engaged to that I’ll give her birthday presents. If I can fulfill this wish, I can ascend to Heaven without regrets. Please help me!”
This request troubled Koremitsu as it implied that he would be accompanied by Hikaru constantly; he would be followed to the bath and the latrine, and so, he reluctantly agreed. Although the mission was troublesome and immensely irritating, he completed it as a proxy.
However, Hikaru still lingered.
He had even continued to say frivolously,
“Actually, there are still another 4 or 5 girls that I’m very concerned about. No, maybe 40, 50 of them?”

Koremitsu had never agreed to aid him with this.
Isn’t 40 or 50 of them too many!? Do you really like to make so many promises with women!? To people other than Aoi!? You harem prince! Casanova! Go die a hundred times over!!!
The thought of it was infuriating.

“Okay now, you should have calmed down by now, right? I didn’t try to trick you deliberately anyway, I want to hurry up and ascend to Heaven too.

It's depressing that I can't see myself in the mirror. No matter how well-dressed I am, or how handsomely I style my hair, I still can't see it. I think that my skin is in tip-top condition today too, so springy. My hair feels smooth and elegant and my cuticle layer must be glowing…ahh, I want to see."
Are you only worried about things like that?
"Koremitsu, you didn't wish for me to disappear; weren't you crying your eyes out?"
Yeah! Return my tears! And I wasn't crying my eyes out!!
"Hey, please agree to my request? Please, Koremitsu! Help me a little more! Lend me your strength!"
40, 50 people is not ***a little****!*
No, if he were to count the women filling Hikaru's funeral parlor,
"Actually, there are another 400, 500 of them."
might be Hikaru's next sentence.

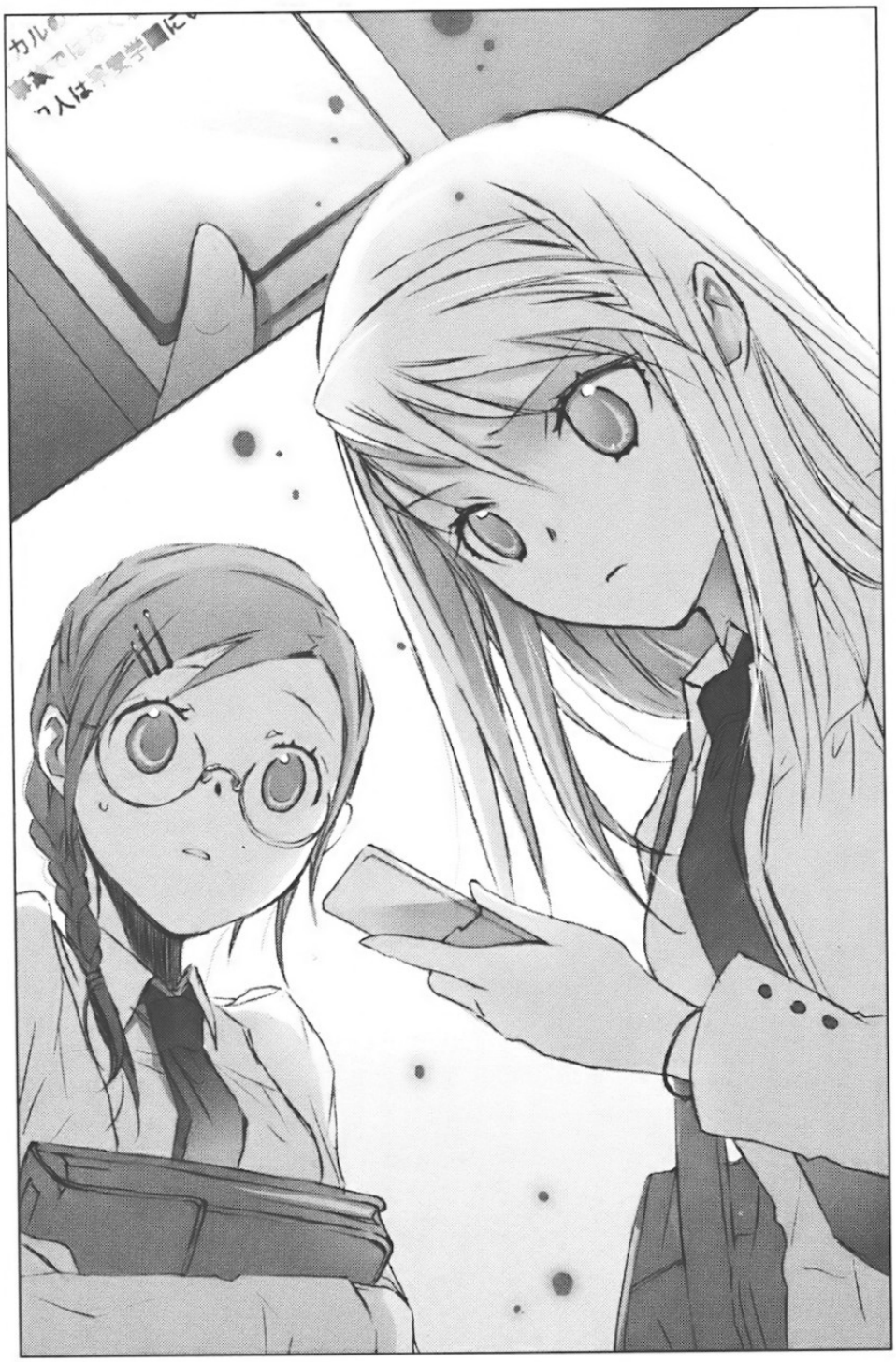
Hikaru's countenance was clearly both innocent and effeminate, but he was an absolute Casanova. Koremitsu wanted no further involvement with him.
"I refuse. I don't want to approach women for the sake of cleaning up your mess."
Koremitsu grumbled with a frown, and Hikaru widened his eyes in shock.
"Oh? Don't you already understand the charms of a woman? You said that Miss Aoi is very cute."
"Eh…"
Koremitsu's face grew hotter at his words.
It was true that he found Aoi's various expressions adorable. He had accompanied her to the theme park in Hikaru's stead, and when he embraced her effeminate, slender body, his heart inadvertently raced.
After finally accepting Koremitsu as a friend of Hikaru's, she opened her heart to him and would even smile at him shyly.
Whenever they met at the school gate, she would blush and greet him courteously with a well-meaning expression.
"Good morning, Mr Akagi."
As it was, she left for the art room after school each day and worked on her paintings of Hikaru. She and the other club members had a better relationship now than before.
It was true that Aoi was cute.
The problem, though, was his classmate—
At the thought of that feisty girl with fierce eyes, he curled his lips unhappily.
"Ah, Miss Shikibu!"
After catching sight of her, Hikaru called out to a girl holding a red and purple checkered umbrella.
The veins on Koremitsu's forehead bulged.
"You see, Koremitsu? It's Miss Shikibu. Go greet her!"

Hikaru called out to her, energetically urging Koremitsu to do the same. He completely ignored Koremitsu's frown, either because he did not see it or because that was the expression Koremitsu always wore.
"Uwahh, Miss Shikibu's legs are pretty after all! Those are really pretty legs, slender and straight~. She looks full of life when she walks. It really brings delight to my heart."
Koremitsu's stomach knotted at Hikaru's profuse applause and the muscles around his mouth stiffened.
"Koremitsu? Why're you eyeing Miss Shikibu?"
Hikaru called out to her, energetically urging Koremitsu to do the same. He completely ignored Koremitsu's frown, either because he did not see it or because that was the expression Koremitsu always wore.
Oi! You're pretending not to see a classmate greeting you here!?
Once again his veins bulged, and he trotted off after her.
When someone greets you, you have to greet them back! Shouldn't you be able to understand such basic courtesy!? What exactly did I do wrong!? Why's she so angry with me!?
He gritted his teeth and made his way beside her.
Honoka raised her eyebrows further, hastening her steps. She replied to Koremitsu's vehement chase by hurrying away. When he caught up to her again, she sped off.
The two raced each other, each trying to cut in front of the other.
"~~~~~~~"
"Kuuu!"
Damn, how can I be losing to a woman!?
He walked forward, forgetting his objective in that process.
"Koremitsu, why are you panting and sweating all over so early in the morning…there'll be a lot of people staring at you, you know?"
Hikaru gently reminded him.
His inherited savage visage and nefarious aura earned Koremitsu terrifying nicknames during his years in Middle School; these nicknames were carried over to Heian Academy, where he was called 'Hellhound' and 'King of Delinquents', and was the subject of gossip.
Were anyone to see him as he were, they would probably say something along the lines of,
"The first-year Akagi's chasing after a girl with a carnivorous look on his face, like a wild beast!"
"Don't follow me, you delinquent!"
Honoka stopped in front of the stairs, pointing her umbrella to Koremitsu and shaking the residual water at him.
"WHAT ARE YOU SAYING!? YOU THINK I'M WILLING!? IT'S BECAUSE I'M IN THE SAME CLASS AS YOU, SITTING RIGHT BESIDE YOU! AND I'M NOT A DELINQUENT!"
"You look the part with that face of yours!"

Honoka finished her sentence in a vicious manner, and shook her light beige hair - the color reminded Koremitsu of a dead mouse - before walking over to her shoe locker.
What sort of attitude's that!? There are no good woman after all!
When she had earnestly discussed Aoi with him, Koremitsu felt, for the first time, that there were some good women like her, and originally, he had intended to permanently seal off his woman-loathing grandfather's catchphrase, "That's why I say women—!"
But because of the grief Honoka gave him the week before, that notion was rejected.
"YOU SEE, HIKARU!? WOMEN ARE ALL LIKE THAT! I DON'T WANT TO GET INVOLVED WITH SUCH UNREASONABLE ANIMALS EVEN IF I DIE!"
Koremitsu was overly exasperated that he lashed out with no regard for the stares directed at him.
"Ah…un, but you do have to bear a little responsibility for why Miss Shikibu's being so unfriendly with you. Erm, I think I must have said too much here, right?"
He spoke hesitantly.
"What? Why're you so indecisive when you're a guy?"
"Yes, I better not say it, or it would be offensive to Miss Shikibu. It's fine, you'll understand later, before your 18th birthday…probably."
He gave a cryptic smile.
Honoka was still close to her shoe locker, and was greeting her friends so cheerily that it made Koremitsu suspect her of having multiple personality disorder.
"Good morning, Michiru."
"Ah, good morning, Hono~"
"I brought the DVD you said you wanted to watch last time!"
"Wah, thank you, Hono."
The responsible looking girl with short braids and large framed glasses was their class representative. Everyone called her 'prez,' except for Honoka, who would call her by her name.
Oi, she's so cold towards me and completely different to the others!
Koremitsu's grievance resulted in a glare and when the braided class representative noticed this, she jumped in fear.
"Ah…go-go-goo-goo-goo-goo-goo-good morning, Mr Akagi."
She stammered out a greeting.
"…Hello."
It was impressive that she could greet him, the hated and feared delinquent, properly; she was a model class representative, and held the title properly by not looking in the other direction and trembling in fear of Koremitsu.
"Michiru, why are you greeting someone like Koremitsu?"
Honoka said unhappily.
This woman really annoys me! Koremitsu's veins jutted out once more.

“Eh? Lord Hikaru was murdered?”

The sudden question shocked Koremitsu.
Hikaru was beside him, still and somber, with narrowed eyes.
Several girls were chatting in the corridor, sounding really agitated.
“This message says that it wasn’t an accident, but a murder!”
“No way! A chain mail?”
“Looks suspicious~”
“It’s strange for him to fall into the river on a rainy day though. Why would any sane person go to the riverside when there was such a huge downpour?”
“Yeah!”
“Was Lord Hikaru really killed by someone?”
“Oi…”
Just as Koremitsu began to approach them…
The melody of a famous band’s top hit song chirped briskly.
The sound came from Honoka’s phone.
She pulled her cellphone out from her skirt pocket with a frown and looked at the screen.
After pressing a few buttons,
“What is this…”
Dismay clung to her voice.
“What’s the matter, Hono?”



Michiru glanced at Honoka's cellphone, and her eyes widened in surprise.
"Ho-ho-ho-Hono! Erm-thi-this is talking about Lord Hikaru's—"
"Let me see!"
Koremitsu walked over to Michiru's side and peered over at Honoka's phone.
The small screen held shocking words.

"Lord Hikaru's death was not an accident, it was a murder.
The murderer is in Heian Academy."

"—!"
Koremitsu gulped dryly as the sound of ringtones filled the air.

◊ ◊ ◊

"Hikaru Mikado was murdered in school!"

This message was first sent last night, but by the following morning, the rumor had reached the ears of every student that attend Heian Academy.
During the breaks, the halls were filled with theories concerning the identity of the culprit.
"Maybe a boy did it out of revenge because his girlfriend was taken by Lord Hikaru?"
"No, it must've been a girl dumped by that harem prince."
"The murderer is in the High School Branch, right?"
"Maybe the culprit is in Middle School, or even College."
"Might even be a teacher."
Koremitsu walked about gloomily and these speculations were not improving his mood. He made his way to the roof, ignoring the fact that it was forbidden from entry.
The sky that greeted him was tenebrous, and a steady cascade of rain fell from it.
He stood on the roof not far from the door, and leaned against the wall to avoid the rain. He questioned Hikaru quietly,
"…You didn't fall into a river and drowned? Someone killed you?"
Hiina Oumi of the newspaper club did mention this before,
"It's just…a little rumor—but Lord Hikaru didn't die from an accident, but was actually murdered."
She even said she was digging into these rumors.
Hikaru simply disregarded the rumors.
"I'm a harem prince who goes around hooking up with girls…so I guess there should be a lot of girls who wanted to kill me."
He spoke with an uncharacteristically mature tone.
His eyes were dull, and there was no sign of confirmation or denial.
After that, Koremitsu could not find a chance to ask him properly, so he did not pay any mind to it, thinking that they were simply baseless rumors.

He did not expect such an uproar to stem from those texts.
Who sent these messages, and for what reason?
Was there a seed of truth to these rumors?
Koremitsu's reaction to the message, an unpleasant stiffness in his countenance, contrasted greatly with Hikaru's emotionless expression.
He was silent, only smiling, which was odd for such a talkative fellow. After a moment of silence, he muttered to himself,
"Who sent it?"
And he then resumed his silence.
Koremitsu was unsure of how to react to Hikaru's spellbound state - he did not know if he should ask what had happened or not; there was a sickening feeling in his gut, and his stomach was knotted so severely he felt nauseous.
If Hikaru doesn't want to say, I better not ask…
It was then that Koremitsu arrived at the roof; he could ask freely with no worries that others would overhear him, but he was still hesitant.
Maybe this might be related to the reason why he can't ascend to Heaven and keeps clinging on to me. Some things are better said by someone else, so I can only exert a little pressure…
Koremitsu's features were that of a delinquent - he was born that way. It was for this reason, and perhaps none other, that his classmates kept their distance from him; Hikaru was his only friend, and the only friend he'd ever had.
He was inexperience in relations with others, and he was uncertain as to how much information he could rightfully request of Hikaru, what he could ask of Hikaru without hurting him.
There were many things Koremitsu did not understand.
He abandoned any hope of going about this with delicacy, and decided to delve straight into the heart of the matter.
He wanted to hear the response of this ostensible gentleman, of this unfathomable troublemaker. He wanted to hear what his friend was thinking.
"What do you think, Hikaru?"
His words tumbled from his mouth awkwardly amidst the quiet rain, and carefully observed Hikaru.
Hikaru did not turn his head, but smiled slightly. His beautiful eyebrows drooped. It was a fragile, lonely smile.
"This is troubling."
The mumbled words came from behind his smile.
"Why must these rumors surface now? My cause of death is irrelevant; the fact that I am dead remains."
Koremitsu's heart beat heavily.
He's trying to avoid this topic again?
"But, Koremitsu…"
Hikaru slowly turned his stare to Koremitsu.
Eh!?

His elegant features were knit into a serious expression, and he spoke to Koremitsu, who listened attentively.
“If I said that I was murdered, would you catch my murderer?”

◊ ◊ ◊

This is quite the broken apartment.
Koremitsu held his umbrella, his bag slung across his shoulder, and looked up blankly at the building in front of his eyes.
It was after class.
The aged, wooden apartment block he stood at now was a twenty minute walk from the school. The buildings gave the impression that they would collapse from the pressure put on them by even the slightest breeze.
The apartments on the block were all two stories high; the block was divided into approximately four separate apartment complexes. The fence and hedges were built from plywood, and the grey walls were full of cracks. However, it looked all the more dilapidated due to the dimness of the rainy day; the atmosphere wasn’t unlike what one would expect to see in a horror movie.
My house is already old enough, but this is worse than that…
Perhaps this truly was the hideout of Hikaru’s murderer.

“Will you catch my murderer?”
Hikaru asked.
“Do you know where the murderer is?”
Koremitsu’s eyes were wide, but he was undecided as to whether Hikaru truly had been murdered or not.
“Hm…I’m not too sure either. I just have a feeling the murderer’s there.”
Hikaru’s answer was uncertain.
“Right, I’ll call the police!”
Koremitsu immediately fished out his phone, but Hikaru stopped him, saying,
“I’m not exactly sure, and if the murderer’s not there, you’ll be scolded by the police. Besides, what reason do you want to call the police to search the murderer’s residence?”
“Uu…”
It was true that he could not say he was instructed by a ghost.
“Anyway, let’s go in and check the situation out.”
How can you say that so simply?…
Although Koremitsu couldn’t so easily agree to this, Hikaru was certainly serious and fervent enough to concern Koremitsu; there was nothing he could do but follow his instructions begrudgingly.

“You sure it’s this battered—erm, relic-like apartment that’s like a historic material?”
Koremitsu questioned him once more.

Hikaru's mood was entirely different from what Koremitsu was accustomed to, and had been this way since they passed the school gates on their way out. He looked at the dirty fence, which was drenched black with rain, with a mixture of nostalgia and serenity on his face.
"Yeah, no mistake about it. Do you see the white flowers blooming at the foot of the wall? They're shuddering gently, drenched by the rain."
*These sturdy flowers are blooming again…*he said while making a dreamy, hazy expression.
"Let's not talk about flowers now."
Koremitsu was a little appalled.
"Which house?"
"The last one on the first level."
The curtains of that room was shut, and the room was pitch dark inside. But there seemed to be someone moving inside, and Koremitsu narrowed his eyes cautiously.
"Alright, let's go."
They passed through the fence, and walked to the last door of that building. The room and the residence behind it were practically sticking to each other; the shadows shrouded the alley, and the visibility was dim. Koremitsu was so tense he was about to have cramps.
They stopped at the last door.
As there was no doorbell to ring, he could only knock the door.
There was no response.
(No one's inside? No, I thought I just saw someone moving behind the curtain…)
*Kooonn…*And there was a little thud that came from within.
The sound was low and soft—barely audible.
Koremitsu was so tense the back of his neck was itching.
"Sorry to disturb you. May I have a moment?"
He muttered and knocked on the door again.
A soft voice came from below the door.
(It seems weird for some reason?)
Why did no one open the door even though there was a sound inside? The location of the sound was very peculiar too.
(It sounds like it came from the bottom…did the person instead pass out?)
Maybe there was someone with his limbs tied up, mouth stuffed, crouched at the door, trying his best to knock the door with his shoulder and head.
This image immediately flashed through Koremitsu's mind, and he hurriedly grabbed the door handle and twisted it hard.
His umbrella fell out of his hands and onto the alley.
"What's the matter!? Did anything happen!?"
There was no response, but there seemed to be a groan, and he panicked the more he heard this.
"Damn it!"

He tried to twist and pry the door open as he slammed on it. The buckle must have been too old as it was immediately slammed loose, and the door fell off with a loud thud. The door was opened!
He immediately rushed in.
“Are you alright?”
There was a stove and sink on the side of the corridor, while the kitchen was on the other.
This cramped 6-tatami sized room did not have its lights on, and visibility was bleak. It was practically a dump, where there were things littered everywhere, either furniture or trash.
“Er, huh…?”
There was no one inside?
Impossible—
Just when Koremitsu was stunned by this,
“Meow…”
He suddenly heard a cry at his feet.
He lowered his head, and found a white cat sitting there nonchalantly, its eyes giving off a bizarre glow in the darkness.
Was the knocking and groaning made by this cat?
(Uh oh, I ruined someone’s door.)
Cold sweat dripped down Koremitsu’s back, and he found something curled up into a ball in the shadows.
“…!”
He again gasped in shock.
Once his eyes were used to the darkness, he gradually saw the situation in the room.
There was a double-deckered bed on the left.
Right in front of him was a window with its curtains drawn.
There was a round short table in the middle of the room, with a notepad computer on it. Were the things on the right side an electric fan, a chair, a wardrobe, a cupboard, a golf bag? Besides this random stuff, there were a few photos and papers stuck on the wall.
Also…
There was something shaped like a hill on the empty space between the cupboard and the electric fan.
A blanket?
Now, it was someone draped in a blanket…a girl.
She was crouched at the wall, and a little bit of white tender skin was shown from under the carpet as she looked over at Koremitsu with a worried expression…she was staring at the red-haired youth who broke the door and entered illegally.
What?
Who was this person?
What was she doing here?
Koremitsu’s mind was filled with questions.

I came here to catch Hikaru's murderer, right? This girl's the murderer? She looks a little too fragile here.
Flabbergasted, he looked over at Hikaru.
Hikaru however passed by Koremitsu with a relaxed expression, and approached that girl.
Only Koremitsu could see Hikaru's soul.
The girl used her small hands to tug gently at the carpet as she peeked at Koremitsu. The long hair sliding out from the carpet covered her face and forehead weakly.
Hikaru squat down in front of the girl, and gave a loving and gentle expression as he said.
"Don't be afraid, Yū. Koremitsu's my reliable friend here. He'll fulfill the 'promise' in my stead."
Upon hearing this, Koremitsu realized he was tricked.
(You conman! Lying harem prince! What did you mean by 'will you catch my murderer'!? Acting all serious like that; you were tricking me, weren't you!? Go down to Hell now and let the king of Hell cut off your tongue!!)
Koremitsu cursed spitefully in his heart.
However, no matter how enraged he was, he could not change the current situation.
Even if he were to try and punch Hikaru, the punch would merely pass through his body; it would neither cause itch nor pain, an act that would merely make him look all the more foolish.
Also, the girl, who could not see Hikaru, was looking up at Koremitsu tentatively.
Even the white cat left its head, ostensibly sizing up Koremitsu as it stared at the latter with cold eyes.
(Oi, what do I do now?)
Koremitsu was tense, sweating all over profusely as he gritted his teeth.
Hikaru knelt down beside the girl, and gave a smile with the intent of 'I'll leave the rest to you'.
(Damn it, what are you smiling for!?)
Koremitsu tried his best to swallow his roar that nearly came out form his mouth, and stood at the corridor to explain to the girl.
"Ah, well…I'm not a bad guy, I'm Hikaru's friend, and he requested for me to look for you."
"Rain…"
The soft voice that nearly merged into the darkness came out from the girl's lips.
"Huh? Rain?"
The girl was looking over at the door that was still not shut behind Koremitsu. Her eyes were showing a fear that was clearer, stronger than before.
Koremitsu looked over at where she was looking.

The rain seemed to have gotten bigger, and the sound of the raindrops entering his ears got stronger. The rain droplets falling sideways splattered on the umbrella in the alley, and sloshed off it.
“Sorry, I’ll repair the door.”
Koremitsu carried the door that was teetering, and turned to look at the girl.
And this moment, the girl suddenly collapsed, ostensibly falling off after the strings supporting her snapped.
“What’s wrong!?”
Koremitsu hurriedly took off his shoes and ran over. The floor rattled, and the trash leaning at the wall shook as well.
“Oi! Pull yourself together!”
He stared at the girl’s face as he shouted.
“Damn it, it’s too dark. I can’t see anything!”
He intended to switch on the lights, and tugged at the string dangling from the ceiling, but it seemed the bulb was faulty.
“It’s fine. Yū’s very timid. She just passed out.”
Hikaru stood beside Koremitsu, encouraging him.
“YOU CALL THIS ALRIGHT!? DON’T SAY IT AS IF IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH YOU!!!”
Koremitsu roared. The blue-eyed cat shrugged with an annoyed look and licked its fore paws.

Chapter 2 - The Fleeting White Flower at the Bottom of the Wall (1)

“Anyway, she’s a very introverted girl. Ever since last year, she never left the house, and would never go to school.”
That night,
Hikaru was talking about Yū Kanai in Koremitsu’s room.
“Actually, she should be in second year this Spring, but because of her lack of attendance, she is unable to make the next grade, and is in first year just like us.
Her parents divorced when she began to shut herself in. Her mother then went to Australia for work, and her father married a young woman, so they are living separately from each other. Yū’s mother wanted to bring her along to Australia, but Yū had a bad relationship with her mother, so she lived alone in that tattered…no, antique apartment.
Her father used to pay all the living expenses, but his new family had a child recently, and the burden became severe. Sometimes, there would be no funds for months, so she lived through a frugal life. The utilities were suspended twice up till now, but she never complained at all, and insisted on hiding in the house, just like a Gourd flower spreading its white petals in the darkness.
Oh yes, a Gourd flower is an annual vine Cucurbitace. They bloom in the evening, and radiate silently under the moonlight in the night. When the morning dawn breaks in, they start to wilt. Those are delicate, beautiful and endearing plants; the curls on the vines are very cute too. Its floral language is ‘a night’s memory’ or ‘illusionary love’, and some people call it the Dusk grass…”
He would start a long discourse whenever it came to flowers and girls without stopping.
He was probably feeling very excited. He was dressed in a white T-shirt, tight-fitting pants, barefooted, floating around in casual clothing and chatting away in the sky.
(Goodness, you’re still in good spirits.)
Koremitsu, who had changed into a jumper worn in the house, was sitting on the tatami, frowning without a word.

He really did not want to recall what happened after that introverted blanket girl fainted.
While trying to take care of her, Koremitsu ran around the room in pitch darkness, knocked into a lot of things, tumbled quite a few times, and even knocked down a few boxes and overturned other things, causing a mess. This commotion even shocked the neighbor, who thought a thief broke in, and the police were nearly called in.
If not for the blanket girl waking up in time, he would have been indicted for sure. If it had really developed to that extent, Koremitsu's already rock-bottom reputation would have plunged further, and in the worst case situation, he might end up being forced to drop out.
"Please, Koremitsu."
Hikaru's knees were together as he knelt down in front of Koremitsu. His back was straightened, and his hands were placed elegantly; from his sitting posture, anyone could see that he had a good upbringing. Even Koremitsu was inadvertently amazed by the disposition of his gestures.
"Can I leave Yū's matter to you just like Miss Aoi? No man can bear to leave such a delicate and pretty girl alone like that, no?"
Hikaru showed an innocent expression as he pleaded to Koremitsu earnestly. The inexplicable expression he showed was exquisite.
"… what does she look like? I couldn't see in such a dark place."
"Don't worry, she's really pretty. I can assure that."
"It's none of my business whether she's pretty or not. Anyway, what kind of promise did you make anyway, you vowing devil."
Koremitsu glared at Hikaru, but the latter answered with a silent mature smile.
"I can't say now."
"Huh?"
Can't say? Why?
Hikaru probed his chin forward, showed a child-like innocent and frisky smile, and clapped his hands together.
"Anyway, please. Didn't you promise Yū that you'll repair the broken door? Given your personality, you won't leave a girl alone after breaking her house's door like that, right?"
"Guh."
Koremitsu was unable to argue back after this was mentioned.

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The next morning, Koremitsu left home two hours earlier than usual.
"What is this? Are you going for morning practice for some ball tournament or something?"
His aunt Koharu, just woke up with messy hair, and her jumper's sleeves and pants were rolled up as she stared at him suspiciously.
"…somewhat."
Koremitsu answered briskly.
"You're bringing the toolbox?"

Upon seeing the item in Koremitsu's hand,
"If you want to fight, go fight barehandedly. Only amateurs who don't know the rules of fighting will bring such things."
Koharu lectured with her eyes narrowed, and turned her shoulders by the joints as she walked into the kitchen.
"Is Miss Koharu an expert in fighting?"
Hikaru asked naively.
"… Don't ask me."
Koremitsu answered with a scowl.

They arrived at the apartment that still looked tattered after the rain, in the morning dawn.
Koremitsu knocked on Yū's room door. A woman with hair curlers and thick makeup walked out from the next room, and stared at Koremitsu.
"You're here again? I'm going to sleep, so don't make a ruckus like what you did yesterday."
"Sorry, I'm here to repair the door. There might be some noise, but I'll try to finish as soon as possible."
It would be bad if the police were to be called in just like what nearly happened the previous day, so he intriguingly lowered his head courteously.
The neighbor, who seemed to be from some night life business, glowered at Koremitsu with hatred.
"Oh, make it quick then."
After saying that, she slammed the door.
"That big sister's fierce to me too, and even told me off with things like 'don't come around in the middle of the night', or 'a brat actually won't go home in the middle of the night? What are the education people doing'. But she's a beauty with quite the nice figure too~. She's like a bright red Geranium."
Hikaru continued on with something Koremitsu was not concerned about.
"Good thing you didn't make a promise with that woman next door."
Koremitsu said with spite as he glanced aside at him, and then knocked on Yū's door lightly again.
The parts he damaged the previous day were repaired by vinyl tape and duct tape.
"Oi, Yū Kanai… Are you awake? I'm here to open the door."
After a moment of silence, the door opened slightly by a centimeter or so.
A pair of black eyes and blue eyes were peering from within.
The terrified black eyes belonged to the Hikikomori girl, and the blue eyes belonged to the cool girl.
Koremitsu showed the tool box in his hand.
The door opened by another centimeter.
She looked up at Koremitsu diffidently.
Koremitsu thought it would not be good for both sides to continue staring at each other without any progress.

“Please excuse me.”
He forcefully pushed the door aside.
The weak girl draped in blue blanket backed away impetuously, and retreated to a corner of the room.
She stuck herself between the double-deckered bed and the wall as she continued to look over at Koremitsu.
Koremitsu knew from his past experiences what effects his red hair and savage expression would have on an ordinary girl. The girls in school did not dare to look at him right in the eyes.
This frail girl was evidently aghast, but she kept staring at Koremitsu with an ambivalent expression.
The white cat of hers curled its tail as it sat down at Koremitsu’s feet, its cool blue eyes looking up at him.
Koremitsu opened the toolbox and took out a hammer and some nails. It was excruciating to work with the stares from the human and animal on him, and he felt apprehensive.
The culprit behind this, Hikaru, kept looking at Koremitsu with a carefree look.
“Wow, your hammering technique is good, Koremitsu. As expected of you, you really are worthy of respect. You, capable guy.”
(You can’t trick me no matter what pleasantries you tell me. You only know how to watch on.)
The sound of the hammer knocking rang in the quiet morning. Koremitsu was worried that the woman next door would run out and reproach him for being too noisy.
Yū was still hiding in the gap between the bed and the wall, and remained still like a decoration. She did not move the hair draped on the side of her face, and curled her body silently in the room.
It was morning and the window curtains were still drawn, but the sunlight shining through the curtains made the room a little brighter than it was yesterday.
There were photos of seas and fishes and ostensibly computer colored picture printouts stuck on the wall. The wind blowing in from outside the door caused the papers to flutter like waves breaking on the coast.
The electric fan, hangers, golf bag, and electric stove were placed together. There were shells, marbles and glass fragments. And the edges of the double-deckered bed had blue and red vinyl ropes dangling down like sea grass.
(What… that’s a really weird interior design.)
Hikaru had stated that she locked herself in the room for a year already, and all her necessity purchases like water and food were done through the Net. She normally would not take even a single step out.
(She always has the curtains drawn, has the blanket covering her, and wouldn’t budge from such a dark and humid place. Isn’t she scared of fungi growing? This lifestyle’s too unhealthy.)

The girl's skin shown vaguely from within the carpet was white like snow, the fingers bared outside were pure white, and even her fingernails were white. This must have been due to lack of exposure to sunlight.
(Oh yeah… does she know Hikaru is dead?)
Upon thinking about this, Koremitsu inadvertently felt a jolt within him. Since she had been shutting herself inside the house, and had not interacted with anyone, she might not have known that Hikaru died.
(This is bad.)
His heart suddenly raced.
There was no doubt Yū was one of Hikaru's many girlfriends. In other words, Hikaru would be her lover.
Would it be good for Koremitsu, a stranger, to personally say her lover died?
He stopped what he was doing, turned his stare away from Yū, and said nonchalantly (though his voice was shrill),
"Eh… well, I said so yesterday, but the reason why I'm here is because Hikaru asked me to fulfill his promise. As for why Hikaru himself can't make it here…Hikaru, well, died stupidly in an accident a little while ago."
"…Koremitsu, I didn't die 'stupidly', you know?"
Hikaru protested unhappily.

"…I know."

It was a gentle voice.
Koremitsu looked back, and found that Yū, covered in the blue blanket, was looking at him.
A few strands of thin hair rested on that white face. Her face showed an emotion that was beyond despondent and tranquillity, similar to resignation.
The soft voice that nearly melted in the air calmly continued.
"…I received a mail."
"Mail? I see. Did a friend notify you?"
Yū lowered her eyes and shook her head slightly.
"It was… an unknown address, and there… was no name on it."
"Yū, do you still have that address? Can you show it to me?"
Hikaru asked, showing a serious look on his face.
"Do you still have the message? Do you mind showing it to me?"
Yū seemed very hesitant, and lowered her head to ponder for a while, before moving away and dragging the blanket.
There was a laptop on the short round table, and a Turkish Blue cellphone beside it.
The slender white fingers reached out from beneath the carpet, picked up the phone, opened the cover, tapped on it for a while, and handed it tentatively over to Koremitsu.
Koremitsu received the cellphone, and Hikaru read it too.

The message was sent one day before Hikaru's funeral. The obituary was rather concise and was devoid of any hint of emotion; the location and time was also stated on it.
There was no sender signature, just as what Yū said.
The beginning of the mail address was listed as 'upvkpv'—
The intent was vague, and they seemed to be a random assortment of alphabets rather than letters with hidden intent.
"…"
Hikaru frowned, bit his lips, and pondered.
"Thanks."
Koremitsu was about to return the phone to Yū, but was suddenly startled.
"!"
Yū was weeping quietly.
Transparent drops of liquid rolled down her white face.
There was no sign of any intense pain, but the clear black eyes were soaked with tears as she wept quietly. She continued to weep, and it seemed the tears would stop without warning.
"Wa-wah, alright, don't cry."
Koremitsu panicked.
He was most fearful about seeing women cry, as it would remind him of the sight of his mother's crying.
She once wept quietly like this too.

—I'm really sorry, Mitsu.

—Sorry.
The emotions quivered in his heart, and he was stertorous.
Damn, why am I thinking about that…?
Koremitsu gritted his teeth with all his might, and forcefully tightened his face and eyes.
Yū said with a weak voice as the tears rolled down her cheeks.
"… It was raining… on that day, when Hikaru's funeral took place… I couldn't go. I couldn't see him a final time… I couldn't see…"
Her stuttering voice was too ephemeral, too lonely, causing Koremitsu's heart to ache as he heard this—
He wanted to tell Yū that Hikaru was present, but Yū could not see Hikaru, and she would probably think that Koremitsu was trying to comfort her.
Hikaru embraced Yū on the shoulders as he looked on with a somber look.
The pretty fingertips that were unfitting for a man entered the blanket draped upon Yū.
"I'm sorry… Yū, if only I came here to see you earlier. You and Lapis[1] must have been lonely, right? I'm sorry."
The soft voice echoed deeply, causing the pain rising in Koremitsu's throat to be more pronounced.
Yū did not know Hikaru was embracing her.

The blue-eyed cat was sticking at her feet, ostensibly comforting her.
Yū lowered her head weakly.
Clear water droplets trickled down her face again.
“Pl-please, don’t cry already! I understand how you feel. That idiot Hikaru died out of a sudden, and you must’ve felt like crying. I’m the same here, I was reduced to a crying mess the moment I thought he could possibly disappear, so I know it’s inconsiderate to ask you not to cry, but please, don’t cry!”
Koremitsu pleaded zealously. He really could not stomach the sight of a woman crying.
His heart was ostensibly about to rip apart.
But Yū continued to cry, and Koremitsu’s resistance wore down as he finally yelled out.
“Alright! I’ll fulfil that promise in Hikaru’s place! I’ll bear all responsibility here!”
Yū lifted her head at Koremitsu.
She was probably taken aback.
Her teary eyes widened slightly, and the tears stopped.
Koremitsu stared right into her eyes, and declared with a passionate tone again,
“I’ll help him fulfil his eyes!”
His veins were popping, his eyes were frowning, and his expression must have been really horrifying. He hoped he did not scare that introverted girl.
Hikaru, who was embracing Yū, narrowed his eyes gently, curled his lips up, and stared at Koremitsu.
Yū’s eyes again showed concern and bewilderment.
She asked softly,
“Promise… what promise?”
“Heh?”
Koremitsu revealed a startled look.
(What… is it?)
“Ah, about that.” Hikaru mumbled as he slowly retreated from Yū.
“Didn’t Hikaru make a promise with you?”
“He did say so a few times… but I’m not too certain.”
(A few times?)
Koremitsu glared furiously at Hikaru.
And the latter,
“Yo, Lapis, how are you doing?”
Continued to pat the kitten on its head.
The kitten grimaced in confusion.
“…I think he said he wanted to put a glass collar on Lapis? Or maybe he wanted to color the fan? Or maybe he wanted to play some ‘sea-themed Shiritori game’ again? Or maybe he wanted to put two straws in the glass cup with blue juice and drink together? Whenever Hikaru is about to leave, he would give me a pinky swear and say ‘it’s a promise’…”

“Fufu, Lapis’s eyes are colored like the Earth, the Commelina-like blueish-purple is really pretty. Oh yes, the floral language for Commelina is ‘respect’ and ‘nostalgic friendship’, you know”
(Hey! What are you laughing for!? Stop playing with the cat! Is this the time for floral languages!? You promise-making devil!)
“…what did Hikaru request you to do?”
Yū stared at Koremitsu with blurry eyes, obviously curious about what Hikaru tasked Koremitsu to do.
“Uu.”
Koremitsu murmured as he glanced over at Hikaru.
The latter smiled awkwardly and clapped his hands together to beg Koremitsu.
“Damn, it’s that, that… the most important amongst all the promises! There should be one, right? Do you know?”
“The most important…?”
“Right, the most important promise.”
Class was about to start, and the door was not repaired.
Please, hurry up and think. Just say it out. No matter how hard it is, I’ll try my best to do it.
“Maybe…”
Yū lowered her head.
“You thought of it? Great! That’s definitely it!”
Koremitsu propped his body forward,
“Maybe… it’s to change the light bulb for me?”
Whilst Yū lifted her face and and said with a serious look.
The hammer fell out from Koremitsu’s hand.

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“What exactly are you planning? What do you want me to do!?”
Koremitsu finally managed to repair the door, and dashed down the dirt path leading to the school as he muttered.
“I just want to fulfil a promise.”
Hikaru floated beside Koremitsu whimsically, and answered with that infuriatingly elegant expression.
“I’m asking you what sort of ‘promise’ did you make exactly!? You made some important promise with her that has to be fulfilled, right? If it’s a stupid thing like Shiritori, I’m not going to bother with you ever again.”
Hikaru’s expression immediately showed maturity.
“Hm, that’s a very important promise, and I can only ask of you, this good friend of mine. Just think of it together with Yū.”
He looked at Koremitsu with a clear expression full of trust, and said this gently. This expression caused Koremitsu to feel flustered, and he nearly fell over after tripping accidently.
(What exactly is this guy thinking?)
There were a lot of things Koremitsu wanted to ask, but it was of utmost importance to get to school on time.

Koremitsu finally managed to make it on time, and tried to catch his breath as he changed his shoes in front of the shoe locker.
“Haa… haa… anyway… if you want someone to help… at least explain what to do… how am I going to do this… wheeze…”
“Koremitsu, you just ran two kilometers. Catch your breath before talking…”
Hikaru showed a wry expression as he said.

“I heard that guy is the biggest suspect in Lord Hikaru’s murder.”

“!”

Koremitsu immediately lifted his head.
Is Hikaru’s murderer nearby!?
He looked around frantically, and found a human wall gathered around him without him knowing, with every person staring at him.
“Is that Lord Hikaru’s stalker?”
“I heard he has been going around declaring that he’s Lord Hikaru’s friend.”
“He must have murdered him because he was too engrossed in his own delusions.”
“Homosexual love sure is intense.”
(Hold it!)
The doubtful stares from all of them caused Koremitsu’s face to twitch.
(Me? Stalking Hikaru!? I killed him because I’m delusional? Homosexual love…?)
After processing the information he heard in his mind, Koremitsu was startled.
(Does everyone think that I’m the one who killed Hikaru!?)

That certainly seemed to be the case.
The people in the school seemed to have deemed Koremitsu Akagi as the lead suspect in Hikaru’s murder, and they would even form a path for him whenever he walked down the corridor. This was a common scene, but in the past, people merely deemed him as the son of some delinquent or Yakuza mob, and now…
“That person and Lord Hikaru…”
“Such twisted love.”
Koremitsu felt his back tingle with numbness as he heard these murmurs from behind.
He finally reached the classroom, only for the noisy atmosphere within to quiet down, and his classmates were staring at him.

The class representative with braided hair, who would always greet Koremitsu even though she was very terrified of him, retreated back to her seat, and did not dare to give him a look.
Honoka, who was seated beside Koremitsu, frowned as she glanced over. She was hesitant, but panicked and looked away once Koremitsu approached, and did not dare look at him during class.
During class break.
“I heard that guy killed Lord Hikaru.”
The gossips continued on, and Koremitsu felt that he could n bear with them any longer if he were to keep hearing them.
(How could I possibly kill Hikaru here!?)
“Because you’re too eye-catching. That’s why everyone’s making random guesses. I’m troubled. Is there a way to solve this?”
Hikaru frowned with an apologetic look beside Koremitsu.
“Well, it’ll be too stupid to take them seriously.”
Koremitsu deliberately gave a nonchalant look.
But in fact, he was already affronted, and his temples were throbbing.
At this moment…

“How stupid.”

A voice rang sternly beside him.
Honoka, who had her eyebrows raised in a disparaging manner, suddenly covered her phone.
She boldly proclaimed as the classmates looked in a confounded manner.
“You’re not kids, and yet you’re going all dizzy by such a slanderous chain message. If this person wanted to say something, he or she could have signed off. I won’t believe the words of a coward who only dares to spread rumors secretly.”
The classroom immediately descended into utter silence.
Honoka did not look at Koremitsu, and her ostensibly furious sharp eyes were glaring into space. Her tone and expression were devoid of fear, but there was an indignant sense hidden within. If one were to look closely, her hands pressing onto the table were trembling slightly.
The class representative with braids hurriedly stood up, and said,
“Tha-that’s right! Hono’s right. I-it-it’s wrong to suspect others on baseless assumptions.”
The classmates looked over at each other awkwardly.
This chancy atmosphere lingered for quite a while, before everyone returned back to what they were doing. Honoka however was surrounded by the class representative and some other friends.
“What’s the matter? Honoka?”
“Why did you say such things out of a sudden?”
Everyone asked worriedly.
“…it’s nothing. I just couldn’t stand seeing it.”

She answered with a pout on her face, and Koremitsu felt relief as he eavesdropped on her.

“There’s still another person in this class who supports you other than me, Koremitsu.”
Hikaru said delightfully.

“Shikibu!”
After class, just as Honoka was walking out of the classroom, Koremitsu hurried after her.
“Thanks for speaking up for me,.”
He felt really embarrassed to actually need a woman to help him, but he was still touched—these two conflicting emotions collided in his heart, and he really did not know what expression he should make.
Honoka blushed immediately.
(Why’s she blushing out of a sudden?)
“Yo-you don’t have to thank me, I didn’t say those words for your sake. It’s just that I just said what I thought. Don’t be mistaken, I have no intention of helping a delinquent like you.”
She stated coldly and chided,
“I’m not familiar with you anyway. Don’t talk to me.”
Then turned and left.
Koremitsu remained rooted, unable to say anything.
(Why’s she so angry with me!? And she actually tells me not to talk with her…)
“DAMN IT! WOMEN ARE HARD TO UNDERSTAND AFTER ALL!”
He lashed out with veins popping.
“Miss Shikibu’s personality… is really pitiful. I find it easy to understand her, and really want to tease her until her face becomes as red as a Snapdragon, but this truly is too difficult for you.”
Hikaru sighed as he rattled on.
At this moment…
“Mr Akagi!”
A shrill voice rang in Koremitsu’s ears, and a short-haired petite girl with bouncing large breasts came running over.
It was Hiina Oumi of the news club.
She had a huge variety of expressions, and her large eyes were dazzling like a boy. She grabbed Koremitsu by the arm and rattled on,
“Everyone’s saying that you’re the lead suspect in Lord Hikaru’s murder! Wah, the Delinquent King has no road to go! It’s like the Saturday Night at the Mysteries Theater! Do you want to clear your name by working with this cute partner to fish out the real culprit? Anyway, the one I suspect the most now is…”
It was unknown if she was pressing her breasts on Koremitsu on purpose, but Koremitsu merely covered her mouth without saying anyway.

“Mm—”
Hiina widened her eyes in surprise as she looked at Koremitsu. He stared back and said,
“All I need to know is what Hikaru said, nothing else matters.”
He recalled the words Honoka just said.
It would be too foolish to be fooled by such rumors. He just need to believe the people that were important, and even if he made a mistake, he would not regret it.
Hiina widened her eyes.
She let go of Koremitsu’s hand, and looked up at him in a dumbstruck manner.
Koremitsu turned away from Hiina, and before he left, he quipped,
“Also, I’m used to hearing such stupid rambling from others ever since I was young. These rumors are as painless as a mosquito bite.”

Hiina blankly watched the red-haired boy walk down the corridor, and suddenly turned back to say with excitement,
“…that’s what he said, prez.”
A tall beauty with long black hair—the student council president Asai Saiga walked out from behind the corner.
Hiina then rattled on to the frowning Asai in a rapid-fire manner,
“This is already a friendship beyond life and death, right? His tone indicates that he heard something from Lord Hikaru. He’s certainly not an ordinary delinquent; that’s true now that I think about it, those who could enter this high school through the entrance exams are definitely not stupid. Everyone knows that the students in this school are composed of the internal affiliated programme students whose families have connections and the external students with outstanding grades—ah, of course there are people like you who have such pedigree of growing up amongst the nobles since kindergarten and have outstanding grades! Anyway, it seems Mr Akagi got something important pertaining to Lord Hikaru; my instincts have always been sharp.”
Asai listened to Hiina’s words coldly, and the latter looked at her in a taunting manner, seemingly trying to agitate her into saying something.
“To me, it seems you’re also high up on the suspect list on who killed Lord Hikaru too, prez! Since you two are on the same position, what do you think about Mr Akagi?”
Asai did not fall for her trap.
Her expression remained as icy as ever,
“He’s simply a wild dog whose bark annoys me.”
She said with uppity, and proceeded to leave.

At this moment, Hikaru, who was beside Koremitsu, was very excited.

“I’m so touched! If I were a girl, I would have proposed to you on the spot! Wow, you’re so cool! I’m so touched that goosebumps are rising on my skin!”
(What sort of ghost would have goosebumps? And why am I blushing!?)
Koremitsu continued to give a sullen look as he said coldly,
“Don’t be silly, it’s not that I don’t care about you hiding something from me. I just feel that, well… even if we’re friends, there are still things you don’t want to say. I too have some things I don’t want to say… anyway, just say so when you want to… since we’re friends.”
Koremitsu got more embarrassed as he continued, and his face started to heat up. He really found it most difficult to say such things.
“Something you don’t want to say? You mean how old you were when you last wet your bed? Some embarrassing essay you wrote when you were young? You said you were the animal rearing rep in elementary school… ah! Are you implying that your first crush was a young kindergarten teacher?”
“NOT! Now’s not the time to talk about me, right!?”
Hikaru showed a carefree expression on his face, and he narrowed his eyes as he gave a blissful smile.
“Ah, I see. I too will wait for you to say it when you want to, Koremitsu.”
“Why are you smiling so heartily? I never liked my kindergarten teacher, and do you know how much trouble you’re causing me here!? Whose fault do you think is it that everybody is thinking of me as a murder suspect and a stalker!?”
Koremitsu grumbled in his heart.
But he had no choice. He just had to have the misfortune of being harassed by such a troublesome person, and even foolishly became friends.
“You’re worried about that introverted woman now, right? If I help her out, you’ll be one step closer in ascending to Heaven, right?”
“Yeah, I guess I can be closer by 100m.”
Hikaru nodded with a beaming smile.
“Seriously, just 100m? How many thousand light years until you reach space?”
“Well, isn’t there a saying that you have to make a first step before embarking on a long journey?”
“Kuuh, I’ll become an old man on the day I finish that journey. Anyway, let’s hurry up and settle it first.”
Koremitsu reluctantly said, and upon hearing it, Hikaru again nodded his head with a sweet blissful smile on his face.
“Right, then, how about you send Yū an email first?”
“Ah? An email?”

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During lunch break.
Why do I have to do such a thing… Koremitsu gritted his teeth unhappily as he started tapping at his cellphone while seated at his desk.
(And I end up being led in by Hikaru, huh?)

“If it’s a sudden visit, Yū might be too scared to open the door, so you have to build up your relationship with her first. This is the moment when you should send a mail, as it’s the most suitable method to approach an introverted girl. You can also use this to practise and treat it as preparation to go out with a girl who likes to laugh.”
(Wha—you’re still trying to find a woman who likes to laugh? How many times must I tell you that I don’t need a girlfriend, and I don’t have interest in a woman who likes to laugh!)
Koremitsu grumbled silently in his heart as he typed the message with sweat dripping down his forehead.
“If you want her to reply, the most basic move is to end the message with a question. Also, try talking more about things she’s interested in.”
Hikaru beamed as he sat on Koremitsu’s table with his legs folded as he started teaching the latter the skills necessary when sending girls messages. His light brown hair continued to flutter gently in the calm wind of the classroom, and his eyes were full of exuberance.
Koremitsu however looked lethargic.
(Huh? A question? Something she’ll be interested about?)

“‘Is that cat guy energetic?’”
“Koremitsu…Lapis isn’t a male, but a female.”
“‘Is that furball in good spirits?’”
“Furball… what kind of antique nickname is that? Be more natural with your words.”
“‘What’s the name of your cat? Lapse? Lapel? Lupus?’”
“Hey, didn’t I say that it’s called Lapis? Are you listening to me?”
“Shut up. I am.”
Koremitsu grumbled irately and continued to send messages.
“‘What did you eat for lunch?’”
“‘Have you eaten some meat?’”
“‘Remember to take in enough Vitamin C.’”
Each line was unintelligible, and as expected, Yū did not respond.
“Koremitsu, think about what sort of message you would like to receive if you’re a girl. You have to write with more elegance and emotions, just like the nobles of the Heian Era.”
“Nobles of the Heian Era?”
The school uniform on Hikaru’s body became a Heian noble’s outfit.
It was a blue-purple robe of great regal.
Hikaru, who had become a ghost, gained a completely useless ability to ‘change clothes’. This set of Heian noble clothing was his favourite, and he always loved to changed the colors and patterns on it. His profile could not be seen off the mirror, so he could not see himself, but he continued to change clothes with such enthusiasm.
“Ki no Tsurayuki[2] did mention in the 'Kokin Wakashū'[3] that reciting poems is about pouring your soul into the words and bring the emotions to the

flowers, moon, mountains. Sometimes, upon seeing the smoke on Mount Fuji, we think of our romantic love; sometimes, when we hear the chirping of crickets, we think of our close friends; sometimes, when we see the dew on the grass or the bubbles in the water, we lament that life is so fleeting—a short Waka is suffused with emotions, right, just like this poem…"
Hikaru then recited with a gentle, serene voice,
"From the first moment I heard the faint calls of the geese, my mind lingered in the skies—whilst I ostensibly hear the vague cries of the geese from the North, and after hearing your voice, my soul remains restless all day, and my heart continued to long. The princesses of the Heian Era are hidden deep inside the Boudoirs; it would be impossible to meet them unless they have close relationships. This poem is used to express the love and admiration after hearing the other party's voice, a longing thirst to meet, and any young lady who receives this Waka surely would want to invite the man in for the night.[4]
Oh, there's also this—the rising tide flow in the day may not be seen, and the sea scatters along the coast, waiting for the night—the high tide in the day can't be seen, so one can only wait by the coast where the sea covers—and hope that they would meet in the night. The writing of this poem is very detailed and hard to understand. Anyway, it's probably about asking a certain lady if he could meet her in the middle of the night. It's really romantic~"[5]
Koremitsu could never imagine hearing the cheesy term 'romantic' from a boy in his teens.
(Just meet if you want to. Is there a need to make a poem out of it!? Those people in the Heian Era are really indirect.)

Koremitsu's patience was practically eroded completely as he worked on this unfamiliar work of composing a message. He really wanted to send a message with direct words stating 'I'll be going over after school. Open the door later!' However, upon thinking about Yū's pale face under the blue blanket, her uneasy expression and teary face, he inadvertently stopped his fingers again.
"…"
He had nary an understanding of women at all, and he did not want to try to appeal to them.
However…
This hikikomori girl had a little resemblance to his mother who left home.
He really did not want to hurt her, and did not want to scare her.
—Yū's very timid.
—If it's a sudden visit, Yū might be too scared to open the door.

"Kuu."
What exactly does Yū likes? What does she hope for?
The fleeting expression continued to linger in Koremitsu's mind.

Her voice when she said ‘maybe it’s to change the light bulb for me?’ after pondering long and hard kept ringing in his ears.
Right. First, I have to improve the lighting in the room or it’ll be impossible to walk, and anyone would end up knocking into things after a few steps. Fluorescent tubes… light… something glowing… the room has photos of the sea stuck on the walls inside. Something that glows in the sea….
“‘I picked up an Angler. Do you want me to bring it to you after school?’”
He typed out the words, and then sent the message.
“Koremitsu, how do you find an Angler on the roadside? Even if it is a simile, you have to find something that's more sentimental, more elegant, more romantic. At least say it is a firefly or something."
Hikaru immediately reprimanded.
"Shut it."
Koremitsu grumbled, but he felt embarrassed
Koremitsu muttered, *What sort of childish thing am I doing here?* But he was actually ashamed, and he did not know what he was writing. At this moment, the phone rang.
“Ah…”
The reply came.
Koremitsu opened the message,
“‘Okay’”
This was the only message that came.
Koremitsu ostensibly heard a soft ‘yes’ in his ears, and was flabbergasted by it.
“Erm, that kind of content is okay? He should have raised his standards and have a few more goes.”
Hikaru muttered to himself, apparently very disapproving of this.

“What’s the matter, Hono? What are you looking at?”
Michiru called out, and Honoka turned her head around in surprise.
“I-it’s nothing!”
She was embarrassed to say she was staring at Koremitsu because she found the latter typing messages intently.
“Nothing at all.”
Honoka answered unhappily, and opened her cellphone with a blushing face.
(Akagi is sending mails… to whom?)

◊ ◊ ◊

“Koremitsu, you seem rather happy.”
“Hm? Do I? Don’t I look normal?”
“But your lips are smiling.”
“Shut up. I said I’m being normal here.”
Koremitsu denied this in embarrassment.
After school,

With the light bulb he bought from a shop he passed by in hand, he went off to Yū's apartment.
Koremitsu was certainly a little happy to finally get a reply after pondering high and low over what to type in his mails, but he was very embarrassed to have Hikaru point this out.
He frowned hard to hide the delight in his heart, and just when he was about to pass through the fence beside the apartment—

(Hm?)

"What is it, Koremitsu?"
Upon seeing Koremitsu stop abruptly and look back, Hikaru asked in surprise.
"No, I just felt an uncomfortable stare."
"Uncomfortable?"
"The back of my neck feels itchy. Whenever I get this feeling, it's very likely that some bastard with a chain or knife would appear."
"You were ambushed so many times? So you really got the title of Delinquent King after going through so many deadly battles, huh?"
"I'm not a delinquent!"
…there's nobody around. Have my senses dulled?
Koremitsu clicked his tongue in disgust, and proceeded down the path leading to the apartment.
The door beside Yu's room was open, and the woman who was apparently involved in night life business, poked her head out and glared at Koremitsu.
"Men are not allowed here."
"Never heard that."
"I just made this rule. Recently, a few of my money sources ran off. You brats are making a ruckus right beside my room; if there's nothing else, just scram."
That woman squawked unreasonably, and slammed the door shut.
"Who cares about what you think anyway!?"
The mouthful of impertinent words used and abrasive attitude shown were really similar to his divorced aunt living with him. Would all women act like this when they grow older?
"Koremitsu, Yū will be terrified if you're too loud."
"O-oh."
After Hikaru reminded him, he knocked on the door softly.
"Hey, I brought the Angler."
After a while, the door opened slightly, and the girl with the blue blanket draped over her peeked out from behind.
"H-hello."
He greeted nervously.
"Meow."
The blue-eyed cat at the girl's feet answered coldly in her stead.

Yū left the door and retreated to the back. On a closer look, she was barefooted, and stumbled as she walked.
(A lack of exercise, huh? This isn't good.)
Koremitsu frowned, but did not say anything as he walked in silently.
"Lend me a chair."
He took a chair as a platform, and started changing the light bulb.
Yū was still holed in a corner of the room, watching Koremitsu get to work uneasily.
Koremitsu removed the old light bulb, and just when he was about to put it on the floor, he saw a slender hand reach for him tentatively.
To his surprise, he found that it was Yū's.
"Ah, thanks."
"…"
Yū nodded lightly, received the light bulb, and placed it on the floor. She then retreated to the corner and looked over at Koremitsu worriedly.
Koremitsu was wondering if he should say something to her,
"When did this light bulb fail?"
He asked, and Yū merely answered flatly,
"…it started to flicker… about a month ago… and it broke down completely two days before… I received the mail informing me about the funeral… Hikaru died on that day…"
She lowered her sights dolefully, seemingly thinking that the lifespan of the light bulb was related to Hikaru's life. Koremitsu was really terrified at the prospect of her breaking down into tears again.
"I see, that must have been really inconvenient. But you could have changed the light bulb yourself, right?"
"…I'm sorry."
"No, I'm not really telling you off. Don't apologize."
Koremitsu was as terrified of hearing others apologize as he was of seeing others cry, and he was more flustered.
"Okay! Done!"
He exclaimed and leapt off the chair.
He pulled the curtains up, and the dim room immediately brightened. At this moment, he finally realized the color of the curtains was as blue as a tropical sea.
The photos of the fish shoals and printed images stuck on the wall could be seen clearly, and the fan, cooker, and golf bag still looked intriguing under the bright light.
(This fan and stove are faulty. The fan doesn't have any blades, and the stove doesn't have an inner lid and pot. These aren't household appliances, but mere decorations, right?)
Yū stood up and tottered her way towards Koremitsu.
The room was very cramped, so she merely took two, three steps.
The moment she lifted her head, the blanket covering her body slid down, her soft silky hair subsequently fell, and her small white face was revealed.

Koremitsu widened his eyes.
This was the first time he saw Yū's face clearly, and it was like a white flower floating on the sea.
She was really beautiful—it was just like what Hikaru said, she was truly a tranquil and beautiful girl.
The ephemeral and dreamy expression was staring at Koremitsu, and the clear lips were slightly ajar like peach-colored shells.
It was a thin smile.
But she was certainly smiling.

Smiling at Koremitsu.
She smiled shyly.
“…thank you.”
The moment she thanked him softly, Koremitsu felt his heart beat wildly.
(Wh-what’s going on? Why’s my face so hot out of a sudden…)
He did not understand why his body was experiencing such a change, and eked out a voice from his dry throat.
“It-it’s nothing, and Hikaru requested me to take care of you anyway. So, well…”
Hikaru narrowed his eyes and showed an amused expression, causing Koremitsu to be more flustered than before, but he continued awkwardly.
“Is it fine if I come back tomorrow?”
The moment Yū nodded slightly, Koremitsu felt dizzy.

On the way back.
Hikaru said with a teasing look,
“Hey, she’s really a pretty girl you can find in your dreams, right?”
Upon hearing that, Koremitsu’s face started to heat up again; he was breathless, his mouth gave a frown and did not speak up.

The next day was the same as well…
“…Yo.”
“…”
Yū, draped in the blanket, showed herself from behind the door along with the white cat.
“Please excuse me.” Koremitsu frowned as he muttered. She nodded with a nervous expression, and retreated slowly to the back bare-footed.
(She hasn’t let her guard down…)
Koremitsu too removed his shoes tensely as he walked in.
The blue curtains were still shut, but the room was lit by the electric light so it was very bright. Yū retreated into the crevice between the bed and the wall, and her black listless eyes were staring at Koremitsu.
(What do I say now…)
He had been coming here for proper business like repairing the door or replacing the light bulb, but on this day, he had nothing to do.
“Ah… have you thought about your promise with Hikaru? I’m not talking about buying a collar for the cat, but something more important.”
Yū lowered her eyes and shook her head.
“We-well, it’s probably too tough to ask you to recall immediately. That guy loves to make promises all the time anyway.”
Koremitsu finished off what he wanted to say as he glared at Hikaru, and the latter merely shrugged, acting as if he was uninvolved in this.
(Seriously, this guy…)
Whenever they talked about Hikaru, the blue-eyed cat would tilt its head to wherever Hikaru was.

It was said that animals have sharp instincts, so perhaps it really detected something.
It did not matter to Koremitsu however, and his current priority was to find something to talk about.
The room was in complete silence, and Koremitsu's palms were sweating from the tension.
Yū looked up at him from under the blanket, looking somewhat awkward as well. She raised her eyebrows, and the smile she showed before is nowhere to be seen, disappointing Koremitsu as a result.
"A-are the stove, fan and golf bag some decoration or something?"
Koremitsu pointed at the junk of shells and glass fragments as he asked. Yū stared at Koremitsu uneasily and whispered,
"…those are the graves of the fish, the… towers of prayer."
"Huh?"
"To protect… the underwater world."
"…"
(Damn, how do I continue on?)
Is her mind drifting far away? Has she entered some fairy tale world after locking herself in the house for so long? Or are all girls like this?
Koremitsu tried to change the topic.
"Those are photos of fish, aren't they? Do you like them? I too prefer fish rather than meat, Yellowtail or salted Saba are pretty good."
(Eh… I think I just went off point…)
Yū lowered her face dejectedly.
I shouldn't have mentioned the Yellowtail collar. Don't girls normally prefer something like smoked salmon here? He regretted.
"…Hikaru brought… the photos. He would bring something whenever he came to my house…"
Yū said with a lonely tone.
Koremitsu spotted her figure lower her eyes. Was she reminiscing over Hikaru again? She looked ready to cry again…
(T-t-t-th-thi-this isn't good! What do girls like to talk about? Hey, harem prince, stop scratching the cat's chin already. Help me think of something!)
Hikaru however did not respond as he continued to play with the cat with a calm smile. At his wits end, Koremitsu exclaimed,
"Speaking of Hikaru! What do you talk with him about?"
(I'm really an idiot! Why am I making her think of Hikaru again!?)
The moment he said it, he regretted his words.
"Tha-that guy has always been talking about getting a girlfriend who likes to smile for me… ah, I think I went off point."
The more he wanted to strike up a conversation, the more awkward the situation got.
Yū raised her eyebrows slightly.
"…he often talked… about flowers."
She said softly.

“Flowers? Oh, he’s always talking about disgusting things like how the Pansies in the garden are like, how the Narcissus beside the lakes are as delicate as girls…”
“You actually called me disgusting…”
Hikaru, who was playing with the cat, pouted unhappily. Koremitsu however was thinking, ‘If you’re listening, help me out here!’
Yū’s expression remained dreamy as she continued.
“He said… the Sakuras in the garden are as pink as a baby’s face… that the Tulips look like they’re laughing when they bloom.
Her white face gradually showed a clear radiance, and Koremitsu was astounded.
“…and also how the queenly Iris start to bloom… how the Dandelion started to grow from the cracks beside the concrete pavements… how the Rhododendron, Erigeron and Lily of the Valley charm him differently every single time… how he looked forward to the imminent blooming of the Acacia and Pyracantha… or something like that.”
Yū’s body was giving off a gentle presence, and her eyes were sparkling.
Koremitsu could imagine how those eyes looked when they saw Hikaru.
She looked with leisure as she sat with a leg pulled inwards, head tilted, with Hikaru in the room.
In fact, Hikaru was certainly scratching the cat’s chin, narrowing his eyes gently, giving Yū a tender and loving look…
There was a girl speaking softly, and a boy staring at her gently.
Yū, who remained confined in her own room on her own accord, showed a light smile that caused Koremitsu’s heart to race, and he even felt his chest ache somewhat.
The dream-like gentle smile rendered him unable to look away.
“…Whenever I hear Hikaru talk about flowers… I feel that I’m strolling in the garden alongside him…both of us side by side, watching the Sakuras and Wisterias…”
Yū showed a blissful expression she never showed before.
To her, the time she spent with Hikaru was certainly full of tranquillity.
Hikaru brought Yū the colors and odor of the outside world.
Thanks to Hikaru’s gentle voice, Yū could imagine the flowers blooming outside.
The shapes,
The colors,
The fragrances!
And with these wonderful imaginations, she could fall asleep while draped in the soft blanket.
Waiting silently for Hikaru’s next visit.
(She confines herself to this tattered apartment, is so poor that her utilities are suspended, is living a pitiful life where she can’t even change a light bulb, and… and can actually smile so happily, so blissfully…)

The dizziness and heart throbbing that appeared the previous day intensified, and his face got hotter…
Dumbfounded, Koremitsu stared at the pure white flower-like smile on Yū's face.
(What's going on!? What's with her!?)
He yelled out repeatedly in his heart.

Chapter 3 - The Fleeting White Flower at the Bottom of the Wall (2)

(It’s weird, definitely weird. What’s the matter with me?)
Due to the change in seasons, Koremitsu was wearing a half-sleeved shirt as his uniform instead. It became a duty for him to head to Yū’s house, and on a certain day after school…
He was standing in front of the food rack in a convenience store, muttering away.
From time to time, his heart would flutter, his head would heat up like a teapot, and his lips would stammer. Perhaps he caught some cold that came with the seasonal change?
The symptoms would become more pronounced whenever he was with Yū. Whenever Yū seemed to open her heart to Koremitsu and give a thin smile at him, these symptoms would worsen. Whenever he thought about Yū, the symptoms would occur, whenever it was at school or at home.
“—What is this?”
“This is ‘Kimchi with three times the spiciness’.”
Hikaru then pointed out,
“Are you going to buy six of those?”
Upon Hikaru’s mention, Koremitsu realized that the basket was filled with Kimchi bottles.
His face reddened. He returned them to the rack.
“If you’re buying them for Yū, I’ll advise you not to buy such spicy ones. You can’t just consider your own preferences, Koremitsu; you need to think and choose what Yū wants.”
“I-I-I-I-I-I-I’m not buying Kimchi for her. I’m buying them for myself.” Koremitsu frantically explained.
“…What does Yū like?”
And then, he whispered with a frown on his face. Hikaru whistled.
“Damn you, what are you grinning for!? Speaking of which, aren’t you the one who asked me to take care of Yū?”
Koremitsu forgot that there were people as he lambasted Hikaru. The shop attendant at the register was taken aback.
(Argh!)

Upon seeing Koremitsu cringe his head guiltily, Hikaru, with a face about to burst into laughter, told Koremitsu,
“That’s right, thank you. Yū likes sweet and translucent food.”
After pondering for a little while, he bought some rock candy and went over to the apartment.
After he knocked on the door, the dreamy-eyed girl and the blue-eyed cat peered outside.
“Y-yo.”
Koremitsu greeted her stiffly. Lapis purred with a ‘meow~’, while Yū nodded at him with a gentle expression.
On the first time they met, she had a blue blanket draped tightly over her from head to toe. Though recently, she merely had the blanket on her shoulders.
Normally, her attire under the blanket would be a sleeveless dress. Her feet would be bare, without socks, and her neck and arms would appear from time to time. Whenever Koremitsu inadvertently notices her white slender calves and ankles, his heart would race without warning.
“A gift.”
He handed over a bag from the convenience store.
Yū received it, peered inside and immediately showed a beaming smile.
“Thank you… I really like it.”
Koremitsu did not expect that something like rock candy could cause her to have such a blissful expression; his heart raced, and his face got hotter.
Yū opened the packet and used her fingers to pick up a piece of translucent rock candy. She narrowed her eyes, her eyes apparently irritated by the light, placed the rock candy into her mouth, and nibbled.
There was a cracking sound as she bit, and she gave a more blissful, satisfied smile.
Upon seeing this expression, Koremitsu’s heart nearly exploded from the fast beating of his heart.
The room was small and the walls were thin. They could hear the sounds of the neighbor opening and closing the door, hard footsteps, and growls of a woman from time to time.
“WHAT THE HECK! THOSE MEN ARE SO PETTY ONCE THERE’S AN ECONOMIC DOWNTURN! THERE’S NO WAY I CAN LIVE ON! EH, MY FUTURE’S BLEAK, FROSTY! EVERYONE OTHER THAN THE MEN WHO SUPPORTED ME CAN GO DIE!!”
Upon hearing the loud voice, Koremitsu shuddered.
However, Yū merely continued to space out even at this point.
“That is… the sound of waves crashing at the rocks.”
“The whales are sneezing.”
She would say such things with a blank expression.
He knew, after these days of being together, that though she was timid and introverted, she was serene, strong-willed, and could face the daily difficulties normally.

He felt that in this sense, Yū was very similar to Hikaru.
At this moment, Hikaru was still crouched on the floor on one knee, playing with Lapis.
It seemed Lapis could actually see Hikaru, and even reached its fore paws to touch him. After missing a few times, it looked up at him in surprise.
Lapis was originally a stray cat, and wandered here soon after Yū locked herself in the apartment. Its ears were not too sensitive, so it had a strange habit of staring at living people and objects; perhaps it was because of this characteristic that he could accurately detect what normal people could not sense.
Hikaru too stared at Lapis gently, and would sometimes use his fingers to prod at its forepaws, and also pretend to scratch its chin.
I really can't get this guy. Why isn't he willing to say what promise he made with Yū? The only thing he does here is to play with the cat. What exactly does he want me to do anyway?
Koremitsu glared at Hikaru, and upon noticing this, Yū asked worriedly, "What, is it…?"
"Ah, it's nothing. Well…how-how did you and Hikaru get to know each other?"
Koremitsu asked in a flustered manner. At that moment, Yū's eyes brightened, and she whispered,
"…Hikaru… first appeared a week after Lapis appeared…"
It was the previous summer, on a drizzling night.
There was a boy dressed in Heian Academy uniform, holding an umbrella, standing in front of the apartment.
Upon seeing that effeminate pretty face appear under the road lights, she immediately recognized him as 'Lord Hikaru'.
At that time, Hikaru was in his 3rd and final year of Middle School, and Yū was in her 1st year of High school, but there was nary a girl in the school who did not recognize the school prince 'Lord Hikaru'.
(What… is he doing here?)
Hikaru was holding onto a light purple umbrella, staring at the fence beside the apartment. This act triggered Yū's curiosity.
Why is he standing there all this time? It's so cold, so dark outside, and it's raining. What exactly is he looking at?
His expression was so tender, filled with affection.
Yū stared at Hikaru from the gap in the curtain, and at this moment, he suddenly lifted his head.
!
Their eyes met, and her heart was petrified.
Her immediate thought was to hurriedly pull the curtains, but Hikaru smiled at her.
That smile was very friendly, tender, and seemingly melted into her heart.
After that, Hikaru placed his umbrella on the fence for some reason, and walked to the apartment in the rain.

Skeptical, Yū did not know what happened outside, but unexpectedly, a few seconds later…
Knock Knock…the sound of knocking rang in her ears.
Covered in a blanket, she timidly approached the door, placed her ear on the door, and heard a sweet voice speak to her,
“I’m sorry for disturbing you at such a late time, but would you mind letting me hide from the rain here? I lent my umbrella to the beautiful flowers drenched by the rain, and I'm at a loss on what to do now.”
There was no sense of pretense in Hikaru’s tone, and the clear voice full of warmth attracted Yū. She opened her door, and found Hikaru soaked with transparent water dripping off him, his hair and shirt drenched, smiling radiantly at her.

“That was… our first meeting.”

Yū’s voice was soft and slow… she muttered,
“Hikaru said… he noticed the Gourd flowers growing at the feet of the wall… those flowers are fragile yet brave… as pretty as a fleeting dream… so he was stunned…”

—You see the white flowers blooming at the feet of the wall? The shuddering gentle flowers are drenched by the rain.

Koremitsu recalled Hikaru’s tone and expression as the latter stared at the foot of the wall in front of the apartment.
He said those flowers were tender and pretty.
Just like Yū.

—They bloom in the evening, and radiate silently under the moonlight in the night. When the morning dawn breaks in, they start to wilt.

At this point, Hikaru was giving a reminiscing expression as he patted Lapis’ head, similar to the moment when he stared at the foot of the wall.
His fingers could no longer touch Lapis, but whenever his white hand moved elegantly, Lapis’ whiskers would shudder slightly.
Yū did not realize her dead lover was in this room, but she still stared over at where Hikaru was with that dreamy expression of hers.
That must have been Hikaru’s usual spot.
Her loving yet lonely expression was heartbreaking to anyone who saw it—
Hikaru too would show a tender look to Yū from time to time.
As he saw them look at each other like this, Koremitsu started to feel uneasy, and had a sudden notion that he was getting in their way.
However, Hikaru would not say what sort of promise he made with Yū, and would not speak to Yū. He only cared about playing with Lapis, apparently not concerned about that promise…

“So, Yū… you became lovers with Hikaru like this?”
Koremitsu’s tone was glum and aloof, to a point where he was taken aback by it.
His stomach started to ache from cramps. Do I not want Yū to go out with Hikaru? Or am I unwilling to stand the fact that Hikaru is only concerned about playing with the cat and leaving his girlfriend with another man? Damn it, why am I so angry?
Yū realized that Koremitsu was giving a gloomy expression; thus, she remained silent and stared at him worriedly. As Koremitsu tried his best to give a calm expression, she moved her mouth impatiently, and spoke with a teeny-weeny voice,
“You seem… to be mistaken… Hikaru and I… were not lovers…”
“What do you mean?”
Startled, Koremitsu leaned his body forward.
“Didn’t Hikaru often look for you? The woman next door even commented vexingly that he returned back home in the mornings before—”
Upon seeing Yū’s face turn red, Koremitsu’s face became hot.
“My-my bad. I’m being too nosy here.”
Yū shook her head as her eyes looked downwards, and her face reddened. She clasped her hands, hesitated for a moment, and whispered,
“Hikaru and I… really did not have that kind of relationship… I know… Hikaru had relationships with many girls… one time… I even asked him, why… wouldn’t he do anything to me… I felt it was weird…”
Yū’s neck reddened as well.
She grabbed at a corner of the blue blanket tightly, cringed her neck, and stuttered,
“And so, upon hearing that, Hikaru… smiled gently at me, and said that I… didn’t fall in love with him…”
Koremitsu’s face was still burning, yet he kept listening to Yū with bated breath.
Hikaru however nonchalantly lowered his stare as he scratched Lapis by the neck.
“Meow…”
Lapis purred quietly.
Yū looked up at Koremitsu with an uneasy expression.
“He said… by looking at the eyes, he knew whether the other party is in love… those in love, their eyes will show a desire to have the other party to themselves. Once he sees that expression, he will fall in love with that person, unable to break away, and at that moment, he wants to practically offer his entire being…”
Yū’s voice got softer, weaker, and once she finished, she lowered her head and remained silent.
She did not seem to be worrying that Koremitsu would not believe her words, but was reminiscing over Hikaru with a faltering heart.

Koremitsu too found it difficult to recover mentally. There was an inexplicable loneliness creeping out from his chest.
Perhaps it was because Yū really looked really depressed.
Also, Yū did not describe Hikaru's usual radiant side, but also his lonely side.
She lowered her head, and muttered,
"Hikaru said that… there is only one exception… that though they were deeply in love with each other, they could not embrace each other… he looked really anguished when he said this…"
Hikaru seemingly did not hear Yū's words as he scratched at Lapis' chin serenely with a profound expression.
Lapis too stared coldly at Hikaru with its blue-purple eyes.
Yū continued to keep her head lowered as she remained silent.
At this point, Koremitsu did not know how to react.
Oi, Hikaru, stop pretending to be dead and say something. The atmosphere is awkward because of you here! Now is not the time to play with the cat!
Koremitsu glared at Hikaru, chiding him while his veins were popping.
However, Hikaru continued to play dead.
No, in fact, Hikaru was dead, a ghost in fact. Even if he spoke up, Yū would not be able to hear anything.
"I want to embrace Hikaru to remove his loneliness he carries…"
Yū spoke with a soft voice that could melt away in the air.
"But he said… that it's not love."
There was an unsteady vibe to her tone.
If even Hikaru, who was well-versed in love experiences, said so, Yū's feelings for Hikaru should probably not be love.
While there was a sweet and fuzzy feeling seeping into his heart there was a feeling akin to anxiousness spreading gradually in him.
Yū wholeheartedly wanted to help Hikaru, to a point where she wanted to accept all his pain.
If he had asked for it, she might have accepted his request fully. She was so gentle and yet so hollow within.
Hikaru's fiancée, Aoi, was a pure girl. A pure white flower who was not once stained.
Yū too was like a white flower, but a flower that could be dyed with other colors without warning. It seemed that if anyone were to touch her, they would damage and soil her petals.
It was probably because of this reason that Hikaru never viewed her as a girlfriend, for he wanted her to maintain her purity.
Could there be any other reasons?—Koremitsu glared over at Hikaru's effeminate face that was still looking aside.
"Have you fallen in love before?"
Yū suddenly asked, startling Koremitsu.
She lifted her head, and stared at Koremitsu with a transparent expression.
Koremitsu took a deep breath, and answered,

“N-no.”
His palms were full of sweat.
(How is love different from other feelings? How do I differentiate between them?)
Koremitsu too did not understand what was the feeling fluctuating at the bottom of his heart.
Yū’s eyes showed an understanding expression akin to sorrow.
Koremitsu felt his heart being ruffled as he watched this, and she muttered with a lonely tone that nobody could ever forget,
“Then, we’re the same after all.”

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“Love… what is it?”
On the way back,
There was a rain before, so the blinking stars littered upon the ink-colored night screen were brighter than usual.
With his back hunched, Koremitsu murmured as he walked with his head lowered. Hikaru, who was following beside at the same speed, answered with a gentle voice,
“It is a yearning for a certain person. This yearning is so powerful that it can change a person’s mental state, and… it’s fleeting.”
“Fleeting…”
Koremitsu’s heart started to ache again once he recalled Yū’s hollow expression.
Hikaru continued on with a mature expression,
“Yes… even if we know that there will be a moment when our feelings will fade away, we still feel bliss when talking about love… no matter how painful that love is.”
There was the one person Hikaru could not embrace.
(Is he referring to Aoi?)
That girl represented Hikaru’s hope.
He once said that in a self-depreciating tone, that he did not dare to pursue her carelessly as he was fearful of being hated by Aoi.
But Koremitsu could not ask.
Unlike Yū, he could see and hear Hikaru; the latter was always with him.
We are friends—Hikaru once said this.
Even so, Hikaru would occasionally show an expression of deep thought, the expression of a grown-up that would not allow Koremitsu to ask, that caused the latter not to ask out of fear.
At such moments, Koremitsu could not tell what he was thinking or what he was looking at. Though their ages were similar, they seemed so distant, and he did not know what to do.
(If I fall in love…will I understand what Hikaru is thinking…?)
If that is the case, will I see what Hikaru is seeing?
Upon recalling Yū’s face, Koremitsu was tormented with pain as if his heart was pinched.

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The next day, after school.
Koremitsu was in the stationary shop, staring at the glass puzzles. The glittering blue transparent puzzle was assembled together, forming a mysterious underwater scenery.
He stared at the completed picture printed on the box.
“Ahh, Yū will probably like this.”
Koremitsu suddenly heard a voice.
“!”
Startled, he looked away with a blushing face. Koremitsu frowned with his eyes raised, but did not say a word; at this moment, Hikaru smiled at him, saying,
“So you have grasped what Yū likes.”
“…”
Koremitsu put the puzzle back, turned and walked away.
“Eh? You’re not buying it?”
Hikaru asked.
Upon hearing that,
“I’m just looking around.”
Koremitsu answered.
“…humph.”
But he turned to another direction, picked up a puzzle, and walked to the counter.
Hikaru was amused by his awkward attitude, and laughed secretly.

Upon seeing the puzzle pulled out from the blue wrapping, Yū’s eyes immediately sparkled.
She stared at the blue puzzle in the box, and said delightedly,
“…it’s pretty.”
She cautiously placed a piece of puzzle on her palm, marvelled at how it sparkled when reflecting the lights, apparently lost herself as she looked on, and smiled.
These actions and attitude caused Koremitsu’s heart to race.
It seemed she just took a shower as her hair was still drenched. Her white skin gave the vague scent of soap, causing Koremitsu to gasp for breath, his head overheated.
(Why is it that my heart just flusters for no reason recently? I hate girls so much… I’m only taking care of her on Hikaru’s request…)
The midterms were about to begin the next day.
He should be prompting Yū to remember ‘the important promise’ between Hikaru and her, solve it as quickly as possible, and end this relationship.
But unknowingly, his objective had changed to wanting to meet Yū.
He was excessively frustrated with himself.
(What in the world am I doing here!?)
Yū scattered the puzzle pieces on the floor.

She knelt down, bent her waist forward, and started playing with the puzzle pieces. The blanket unravelled, and her sleeveless dress revealed the white flesh of her neck at the collar. The fragrance of shampoo and soap whiffed into Koremitsu's nose.
"Your hair…"
"?"
Yū lifted her head.
"Hurry up and dry your hair first!"
He inadvertently spoke with a gruff tone; his cheeks were stiff, his eyebrows were raised, and his expression was probably as savage as a wild dog.
Upon noticing how terrified Yū looked, he realized that he should not have done that.
(What idiotic things am I doing here!?)
"I-I-I-I-I'm not angry here! I'm not scolding you, just that I find your hair to be so long. If you don't dry it quickly, you may get a cold…"
Koremitsu frantically tried to explain, his head seething.
"…Sorry, I don't have a hairdryer… I can only let it dry…"
Yū said tentatively, her shoulders cringed as she looked dejected.
"Actually, I don't use the hairdryer often either! I just leave it as it is after washing it! I'm really not angry at all! I may not look happy, and my expression looks savage but this is all hereditary—I'm always like this, okay! So I don't know how to smile, and I rarely laugh. Hiakru said that he wanted to introduce a girl who likes to laugh, but I think she'll be scared away immediately after seeing me… it's meaningless to say this… this isn't what I want to say…"
Koremitsu tried his best to explain, but the more he did, the more dejected she got.
If I can smile gently just like Hikaru now, I can calm Yū like this instead of spending so much time explaining to her.
Why can't my face act however I want?
Why can't I laugh whenever I want?
I guess this cringing face looks as twisted as a crying face now, right?
This will only terrify Yū more!
At this moment, Yū said silently,

"I don't… hate your appearance…"

Koremitsu's gasped.
Yū's eyes looked up at him, her eyes filled with uneasiness. However, it seemed she was not terrified of him, but wanted to encourage him.
Koremitsu was unable to move, his eyes fixed upon Yū. She said with a soft, gentle drizzling-like voice,
"…You are, a gentle… person… and you are very affectionate… with me."
His chest shook silently.
Some heat returned back to his icy cold fingertips too.

“One of these days, you will be able to laugh.”
She said in a prayerful manner.
“I too… find it harrowing to leave my house…”
Sadness rose beneath her transparent eyes. She lowered her head, remained silent for a while, and turned towards where the electric fan and golf bags were in a pleading manner.
There were shells and the majolica were towers of prayer and graves of fishes, and Yū said they were meant to protect the underwater world.
Koremitsu suddenly recalled about Yū’s parents divorce when she remained holed up in her room. His heart winced at this.
Yū too harboured a deep wound.
“But when I talk here with Lapis and Hikaru… I just feel so relaxed… so… you definitely can laugh by staying here…”
Yū’s words dripped onto Koremitsu’s heart, just like how the drizzle rained silently, seeping into the dirt.
Yū used her index and middle fingers to pick up a piece of rock candy from the glass container, and brought it to Koremitsu’s mouth.
His face blushed awkwardly, and he felt he was a wild dog being fed as he stiffly opened his mouth. The translucent sweet crystal touched his lips and tongue.
Once it entered his mouth, he immediately tasted an intense sweetness within.
Koremitsu, who preferred spicy food, felt his tongue go numb.
Yū too took another piece and placed it in her mouth. She played with it using her tongue for a little while. Her mouth let out little cracking sounds, then showed a blissful smile.
“As long as anyone stays here… they can feel… happiness.”
The rock candy remained in Koremitsu’s mouth, as he could neither swallow nor spit it out.
It truly was sweet enough to be aptly described as happiness.
But this was too sweet to him.
His chest throbbed, his pulse raced; he did not understand himself, and felt so tentative and helpless—
Yū cringed her body, closed her eyes, stuck her ear to the floor, and was supposedly listening to the sound of waves that did not exist.
“Pain… sadness… there are things happening in the world far away… in this world, it doesn’t even matter if I don’t use an umbrella…”
There was still more than half the rock candy inside his mouth.
Yū did not murmur anything, and did not move.
It seemed she had fallen into a deep slumber.
Koremitsu called her, but there was no response from her.
He bent his back over to approach her face; he whiffed upon the scent of shampoo, and could hear a weak snore.
He frowned as he tightened his mouth, got up and looked at the ceiling.
He let out a deep humming from his tightly sealed lips.

He widened his eyes, gritted his teeth, and stared upwards as if giving a vengeful glare to a sworn enemy.
Koremitsu said,

“Hey, Hikaru.”

A gentle voice responded,
“What is it? I thought you had forgotten about my existence here. It seemed you could not see me at all.”
Hikaru stared at Koremitsu with a bemused expression, descended onto the floor, sat on his knees, and let his delicate fingertips tap Lapis on the head.
Lapis cringed in shock, and stared over at Hikaru with a brooding expression.
“You’re the one who’s pretending not to see. Why’re you sticking to the ceiling, sleeping away like you’re dead or something?”
Koremitsu said with his cheeks puffed, and Hikaru showed that mature smile that Koremitsu repulsed.
“I am watching, both you and Yū. You two are important people I’m watching over now.”
(Are you serious?)
Koremitsu’s lips curled harder.
“It looks like you’re really bothered, hero.”
“Isn’t that your fault or something!?”
“Yū’s sleeping because she can already relax with you around. When she’s with me, she often falls asleep when talking. This shows that she really trusts you, so no matter what happens, don’t get all horny here.”
“NO WAY! DON’T PUT ME ON THE SAME LEVEL AS YOU, YOU PERVERT!”
Actually, he was not simply feeling concupiscent; he was feeling mushy all over, and his body was beating wildly all over.
The hand and delicate white feet revealed from beneath the blanket caused his head to be on the verge of boiling.
And at the same time—
There was also another feeling, another doubt, rising from within his chest.
The sweetness that still lingered on his tongue continued to ask at this point.
Koremitsu muttered,
“Hey… will I really be happy staying here?”
The moment he said this, the protruding feeling at the bottom of his heart strengthened.
“Can I really laugh… if I continue to stay here?”
Yū, who murmured with such a fleeting smile,

—You will feel happiness…

“Is this kind of lifestyle Yū’s living really happiness? What exactly is happiness?”
Is living this kind of life, locked alone in the house, meeting only with a select few, really happiness?
Lapis’ eyes were staring at Koremitsu.
Its eyes seemed to give the impression that there was a globe rotating in that small space within its eyes.
Hikaru suddenly showed an aloof expression akin to Lapis’,
“I’m just a ghost. I can’t answer this question.”
“Eh?”
Koremitsu asked back in surprise,
Hikaru stared at Koremitsu silently with a wise expression,
His tone too became aloof,
“This ‘happiness’ is something only the living have the privilege to think of after all.”
“Wait… why are you acting like a bystander now? You’re the one who brought me here!!”
He was bewildered upon hearing this, and inadvertently hollered,
“And why wouldn’t you say what promise you made with Yū no matter what? What are your plans for her!?”
He could not understand why Hikaru’s tone became so aloof.
Hikaru’s white handsome face lost all expression, seemingly gazing upon the events of a distant world. He murmured,
“This won’t do, Koremitsu… I can’t tell you the answer.”
Upon hearing this, Koremitsu felt his head seething with anger. In his furor, he roared,
“What kind of joke is this! You bastard!”
The neighbour started to knock on the wall, not once but a few consecutive times.
The wall rumbled, and Yū opened her eyes slightly,
“…the waves are… really big today… is the whale flapping its tail hard…”
She said in a stupor.
Then, she found Koremitsu frozen there with a stern look, and asked worriedly,
“…What’s the matter?”
Hikaru turned away from Koremitsu and continued to pat Lapis’ head.
Unable to vent his frustrations anywhere, he suddenly called out in exasperation.
“…Yū, how about we go to school?”
“Eh?”
Yū lowered her eyelids.
Koremitsu knelt down in front of Yū, his body leaning forward.

“It’s not normal to keep locking yourself in the room every day, and it’s not good for your health either. The line between reality and delusions will also become vague. Better get out and walk before your legs start growing fins!”
He really did not know if he should have said those words.
But upon seeing Hikaru being so aloof, he was so vexed within, and he inadvertently said out these impulsive words.
“If anyone bullies you, I’ll beat him up good. If you go to school, we can meet anytime! We may be in different classes, but I can accompany you during lunch break if you’re lonely… we can have lunch together…”
What in the world am I saying?
Koremitsu felt his throat parched, and his face scorched.
Yū’s face however paled, and with a teeny-weeny voice,

“No…”

She answered.
Koremitsu was perplexed.
Yū pulled her blanket tightly with trembling hands, and slowly backed away.
“Don’t. Why, must you say… such things? I don’t want to go to school.”
Normally, she was able to talk calmly in front of Koremitsu. However, at this point, she was terrified. To a point where her entire body was repulsed by the notion.
“Y-you can’t possibly hide inside the house for the rest of your life, right? And you need to think of how to earn money to pay your rent and living expenses. What’ll happen if your dad doesn’t provide money for you?”
Yū’s shoulders shouldered. Like a chided child, she winced, and said with a sobbing voice,
“I-I’ll hang on even if I’m hungry.”
“The gas and electricity might not be the only thing cut off next time. They may cut off the water.”
“I’ll hang on.”
“You’ll die.”
“I’ll hang on. That’s better than going to school. If I go to school, everyone will give me icy stares, and even say some bad things around me. I’ll be alone in school…”
She exerted more strength as she tugged at the blanket, cringed back, and draped herself under the blanket in the corner. Koremitsu felt his heart gorged apart, his head boiling over as he started to lose confidence.
(Did I say anything wrong here?)
He could not tell.
Hikaru continued to pat at Lapis’ head, his eyelids lowered, his effeminate pretty fingers gliding gently—and showed no reaction to Koremitsu’s words and Yū’s timidity.
Koremitsu was further incensed the more he saw this. I’m different from HIkaru, I’m really someone who cares for Yū here! He thought.

He could not stop once his temper flared up!
“I said it before! If anyone bullies you, I’ll beat him up good! I’m the same as you too! Everyone in school’s always giving me suspecting looks, spreading all sorts of baseless rumors everyone, saying I’m a delinquent, some murder suspect, and I can’t even get a friend as a result! Even so, I still go to school every day, and I will finish my homework obediently!”
The more serious he spoke, the more Yū’s heart seemed distant from him. She did not want to look at his face any further.
A weak voice came from underneath the blue blanket.
“Because… you’re, very strong… I definitely can’t do that… if we go to school together, I’ll die. Since I’ll die either way, I’d rather starve to death here.”
“DON’T SPOUT NONSENSE HERE!”
At his wits end, Koremitsu furiously leaned forward, but his arm accidentally hooked upon the golf bag.
An unsteady feeling came about, and the bag immediately tumbled over. The electric fan and stove too flipped, while the shells and marbles fell all over the floor.
Yū revealed her face from underneath the carpet, and looked on blankly. She dragged the blanket as she ran towards the fallen golf bag and electric fan.
“Ah, m-my bad…”
Hikaru remained still.
That splendid side profile remained as still as a marble sculpture.
“Go back…”
Yū’s petite face was filled with fear as she whispered.
She knelt down, her hands trembling as she picked up the scattered shells,
“Go back, go back! Never come back!”
She continued, and sprawled on the floor, her face sticking onto it. It was obvious she was crying from her shuddering shoulders and choking voice.
Then, she spoke to the startled Koremitsu with a hurt voice,
“…you are different from Hikaru after all.”

(Damn it, I already knew it!)
The sky was dark as he headed down the path leading home, and Koremitsu gritted his teeth, clenched his fists, and roared out deep within his heart.
(Hikaru and I are already different; I’m not as adept as him at handling girls. Hikaru wouldn’t do anything, so I thought I should do something for her…)
He did not expect her to be this unwilling to go to school.
“HIKARU! STOP PLAYING DEAD AND SAY SOMETHING! DON’T JUST BRUSH ME OFF WITH THAT ‘I CAN’T TELL YOU THE ANSWER’ LINE ALREADY! ISN’T YŪ YOUR WOMAN TOO!?”
He hollered out, his chest burning and his throat parched.

Hikaru continued to stare at Koremitsu while standing upright in the blue darkness.
The hair and skin that lacked pigments was seemed to be fading into the darkness, giving off an aloof and illusionary feeling. The hue in his eyes was lighter than before, and while it made him look exceptionally pretty, it also made him look more disjointed from the world, and it was hard to determine his feelings.
Koremitsu stared at him with a raging and pleading expression, and Hikaru finally showed a slightly more anguished expression.
“In the past, someone important… once chided me… why I made such a decision. At that time, I felt that my decision might not be the correct one…”
Koremitsu did not understand what Hikaru was saying.
All he felt was that there was a door sliding shut silently in front of him. Right behind this transparent door was a pretty boy with white skin—the boy he viewed as a friend.
“And because of this… you want to ask me to make a decision!?”
Hikaru did not answer.
He closed his pale lips tightly, narrowed his eyes, and smiled in a lonely fashion.
(Why are you smiling at such a moment! You’re going to leave Yū alone like this? Yū’s still chasing after your illusion in the room, even now! She’s needs you, not me!)
Koremitsu glared over at Hikaru, his irises about to pop out, and then shouted with a contorted expression.
“FINE! I WON’T RELY ON YOU!!”

Chapter 4 - What, Worried? I'm Not Worried About You at All!

(What’s with Akagi…)
On the first day of midterms.
Honoka could not keep her mind off Koremitsu Akagi seated next to her.
He would sigh and moan without warning during the tests, or even scratch his red hair from time to time.
Honoka initially thought he was vexed because he could not think of the answers, but after glancing at him a few more times, she found that throughout the tests, his back was arched, his stare was as vicious as a wild beast, there were veins popping on his forehead, and he was scribbling answers on the papers.
However, he was sighing and scratching his head even then.
Once break time came, he whipped out his cellphone and fumbled at it, typing, deleting, retyping and deleting again. After sending the message, he would check if there was a reply. At various moments, he would groan, show gloomy looks, raise his eyebrows, or pant furiously.
It seemed he was not troubled over the exams.
(Did he have an argument with the person he’s sending emails to…?)
Since the end of last month, Koremitsu had been using the cellphone during class breaks.
Everyone was terrified of Koremitsu, thinking that he was a savage delinquent. As far as Honoka knew, he had nary a close friend in school; during class breaks, he would often arch his back and revise the materials for the next class.
But on a certain day, he was typing letters on his cellphone with rigid fingers, his face stiff and body sweating all over.
After sending a few emails, he kept frowning and groaning, probably because the other party did not respond. Once he got a response, he just stared at the cellphone blankly.
On the next day, he was typing messages intently like a child who just bought a cellphone.
This time, he seemed to have gotten an immediate reply, and started staring at the cellphone blankly.
His actions were eccentric; he would fidget distraughtly, would look away towards a direction no one was at without warning, pout while blushing,

and slap his face with one hand, or stare into space while ostensibly in deep thought.
(Is he sending emails to a girl?)
Is he dating someone outside the school?
She immediately panicked the moment she thought about this.
(No, why am I so shocked here?)
This inexplicable response caused her to be further flustered, and her heart pounded readily. After reaching home, she continued to hug her plush toy as she sat on the swivel chair and spun around.
Honoka was also frustrated by how she had been giving Koremitsu Akagi the cold shoulder recently.
Actually, she knew that though Koremitsu had the appearance of a delinquent, he was an upright young boy on the inside.

—I'll protect you.

This line Koremitsu said with a serious expression caused Honoka's heart to flutter.
The one he liked was Aoi.
He kept chasing after Aoi persistently.
Honoka knew this, but she could not avert her eyes off Koremitsu.
She realized this about herself since he learnt that he was rejected by Aoi.
In the end, she simply did not want to admit it. That vicious looking bastard, whose verbal etiquette was lacking, who did not know what trendy restaurants he could choose for a date, was far different from her preferences.
However, she just could not help but remain concerned about Koremitsu.
She would think of looking at him all the time; thus, she kept herself occupied whenever she was at her seat, by often looking away in the opposite direction, or by tapping at her cellphone.
The reason why she did not answer Koremitsu's greetings and say such spiteful things at him was because she did not want to admit that her mind would turn blank whenever she met him, and that she could not say anything.
Honoka did not want to show Koremitsu the feelings even she was confused with, and was unyielding on this.
She tried her best to show an aloof attitude to Koremitsu, but her temper inadvertently flared once it seemed Koremitsu got a new girlfriend, who looked hesitant while messaging.
No, it is impossible for him to get a girlfriend. It's probably just a wishful thinking on his part; right, that is definitely it.
Speaking of which, was it too frivolous of him to chase another girl so soon after being dumped by Aoi? He is the worst, rotten to the core. Hopefully, Akagi gets dumped by her soon.
Honoka sometimes would have such thoughts.

However,
She saw how frustrated Koremitsu looked as the latter remained on the seat beside her, and her worry soon overcame all other emotions.
(Akagi looks really tired…)
Perhaps he was not getting along well with the girl after all, and he was frustrated to a point where he could not sleep well at night?
(What exactly happened? Shall I ask him first? But I said so many bad things about Akagi before. His impression of me must have worsened. Besides, we aren't friends…)
Perhaps she should have been honest the last time Koremitsu thanked him if she had known…if that had been the case, she could probably ask him naturally.
(Why am I being so childish here? I even told him not to talk to me…)
There was a World History Test, which relies heavily on memorization, in the upcoming period. It would be better to memorize a few year numbers.
Koremitsu covered his phone, slumped his shoulders, and sighed deeply…
At this moment, his stare turned towards Honoka incidentally.
(!)
His red hair was resting on his forehead, and his eyes looked weak; he was practically a wild dog ready to collapse any time soon.
The moment his eyes met Honoka's, his expression seemed full of zeal for some reason; he lifted his head up to stare at her.
(Wh-what's the matter… is there something on my face?)
Honoka's face heated up, and blushed.
Koremitsu was apparently pondering over something as he continued to stare at Honoka.
"Lo…"
What are you looking at!? Just when she was about to blurt this spiteful line out, Koremitsu panted, and said,
"…looks like I can look to you for help."
"Huh?"
Koremitsu frowned hard as he gave a pleading look, and said to Honoka, whose heart was pounding inside,
"Shikibu, do you mind going to the roof with me after the tests are over?"

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"Please! Be my heliotrope, my purple fragrance again!"
It was a reenactment of the past as Koremitsu bowed deeply while his hands were placed on the side.
As the cloudy skies looked ready to rain upon them anytime soon, the whirl on Koremitsu's hair appeared in front of Honoka's eyes.
"I have to apologize to you for angering you in some way. I must have done something to offend you, and I'm really sorry for making you unhappy! If I caused you any harm, I'll take responsibility!"
"W-well… I'm not hurt anyway."

It was because of personal feelings that Honoka was acting aloof to Koremitsu, so she was shocked to hear this from Koremitsu.
His attitude was earnest.
“I’ll do whatever you ask of me in the future! I’m fine with being your servant for half a year! You can call me a wild dog if you want!”
(I don’t wanna! If I call you that, everyone will be glancing at me instead!)
“Well, Akagi.”
“I can let you kick me until your anger subsides! So…”
Koremitsu lifted his head.
He stared at Honoka with a troubled look of desperation.
Honoka’s chest suddenly tightened.
“…please.”
His eyes narrowed painfully as he said hoarsely.
The pained expression was crushing Honoka’s heart,
“Well, please, don’t hate me.”
“Heh?”
Upon seeing how Koremitsu was showing such pained expression, Honoka’s will weakened, and she nonchalantly commented,
“The reason why I said such things to you is because I have a bad personality.”
“Why are you talking about yourself like that?”
Perplexed, Koremitsu asked.
“Anyway, I’m not really asking you not to talk to me, so when there’s trouble, don’t beat around the bush and just tell me directly.”
“Is-is that so…?”
Honoka’s arms were folded in front of her as she showed a high and mighty attitude, but she continued to glance at Koremitsu secretly.
Koremitsu’s head was lowered, and his face was blushing as he poured out his troubles.
He mentioned of a Hikikomori girl called Yū Kanai.
That girl was detained for the year due to lack of attendance, and as of this point, she was the same year as them. He intended to advise her to continue attending school.
However, that girl would not accept his proposal, and got hurt as a result.
Even so, he felt that for her sake, this could not continue, and he definitely had to drag her out of her house.
“That damned useless Hikaru actually watched on like that! I don’t want to rely on someone like him again! He’ll definitely say that I’m too robust, that I don’t understand a girl’s heart, that it became like this because of this… I apologized through the emails, but there’s no response. I’m already at my wits end…”
Koremitsu’s rant was baffling, probably because he was overly distraught, and would frown and mutter from time to time.

Even so, Honoka got the feeling that Koremitsu was worried about Yū Kanai, and how he wanted to bring her out of the house. Whenever she saw him wince, bite his lips, lower his head helplessly, she felt her chest ache.
Honoka too had heard of Yū Kanai.
At that time, Honoka was in her third year of Middle School, and Yū was in her first year of High School. Thus, Honoka only knew that she was bullied by the girls in the same year, did not dare to go to school. She did not know of any other details other than a mysterious event involving her.
Also, Honoka knew that Yū was the beloved of a particular famous person in school.
Honoka never met Yū before, but she felt that the latter was a gentle cute girl any man would want to protect upon seeing her.
For even Koremitsu too was so worried over Yū Kanai…
“I never cared about how I’m isolated and being talked about behind my back, so I’m very insensitive when it comes to such things… after returning home, I calmed down, thought through things, and understood something. Yū’s a girl, weaker than me; there’s no way she dared to go to some place without any friend. Girls need their friends to accompany them to the toilet. They eat their lunches together too… girls always eat together…”
Koremitsu seemed to be furious with himself as he scratched his head violently, and murmured,
“I can’t accompany her to the toilet, and if she follows me, others will isolate her further and say worse things about her. I’m an idiot for not thinking about that… damn it!”
Frustrated, he frowned and clenched his fists.
“Yū still needs female friends. She needs a girl who is courageous, who doesn’t care about the eyes of the people around her, who values relationships, knows how to read the atmosphere, and helps her when she’s troubled. You’re the only one I can think of.”
Koremitsu was staring right at Honoka’s eyes.
It was the same when Aoi was involved.
Such zealous eyes.
Honoka was scorched by his fiery expression, and her body was aching within.
She did not understand why her heart was fluttering, and tried to speak in her usual tone,
“You certainly are working hard here, Akagi. Have you fallen for Kanai?”
The moment she said that, she regretted it.
For Koremitsu clearly looked astounded, and betrayed a look of weakness carelessly.
“…”
He widened his eyes, lowered his stare, took a deep breath, and remained silent with a dejected look.
Honoka’s words revealed the emotion Koremitsu himself had yet to realize, and brought his real thoughts to the surface.

Koremitsu might have thought his feelings for Yū were simply of sympathy and valor.
But at this point, he realized that there were other emotions mixed in.
And Honoka had to be the one who reminded him.
“S-stupid, why aren’t you saying anything? Your expression is really funny here. You’re pretending to look so sentimental even though you’re a delinquent.”
Honoka tried her best to sound positive.
She really wanted to treat what she said before as a joke.
“I’M NOT A DELINQUENT!”
Koremitsu too argued back with a bewildered voice.
It seemed he viewed her comment as a joke.
It’s fine, it’s fine now.
Honoka tried her best to comfort herself in her heart, but did not understand what was fine.
Then, she smiled and said,
“Fine, I can help you. You just need me to be friends with Yū Kanai? Don’t look at me like this? I used to be a girl scout, and I’m good at making friends with introverted girls. Just leave it to me!”
Upon seeing the glowing look on Koremitsu’s face as if basked under sunlight, Honoka suddenly felt an aching in her heart.

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Afterwards, Honoka and Koremitsu headed towards the apartment Yū Kanai stayed at.
On their way there, the downpour got heavier, and Honoka opened her red-purple umbrella.
“Eh? You don’t have an umbrella? The weather report says that there’s a 50% chance of it raining today.”
“Doesn’t that mean it won’t rain today?”
“Of course not. Wouldn’t anyone think of bringing an umbrella if they know that there’s a 50% chance of rain today? Guess there’s no chance. Come in.”
She moved the umbrella over Koremitsu’s head.
“I’m fine here.”
“I won’t feel good walking with a man who’s thoroughly soaked.”
She forcefully tried to get Koremitsu under the umbrella.
It was unknown if Koremitsu was embarrassed or trying to be polite as he merely moved shoulder halfway under the umbrella.
Whenever Honoka tried to move the umbrella over to his side, Koremitsu would move away a little.
He was frowning, his lips were tense, and his face was blushing.
Upon seeing him like this, Honoka suddenly had a warm, fuzzy feeling within her.
She actually did not want to meet Yū, but because of Yū, she was able to patch her relationship with Koremitsu.

Thus, it would be best not to think too much, focus on helping Koremitsu, and try her best to build a relationship with Yū.
(Shouldn’t the guy be the one holding the umbrella this time?)
Honoka muttered in her heart, and smiled.
Because her heart was wrung as she felt this boy, who was frowning and tense all over, was being so cute.

They both bought beautiful red, orange jellies as gifts, and arrived at the apartment.
With a stiff face, Koremitsu knocked on the apartment door.
“Yū, it’s me.”
Koremitsu’s gentle and deep voice had a mix of courtesy and hesitation; it was completely impossible to imagine he would have such a tone from his usual demeanour.
“I mentioned in the email that it was my fault yesterday, and I want to apologize to you. I want to let you meet someone… can you open the door?”
It was silent inside; Honoka and Koremitsu waited silently.
“Meow…”
There was a cat’s purring, and the sound of the door being unlocked.
Honoka’s heart thumped loudly.
(What kind of person is Kanai…? Is she prettier than Her Highness Aoi?)
She suddenly felt tense.
The door opened slowly.
A white cat first poked its head out from the bottom of the door, and looked up at them with its clear blue eyes.
Then, a girl draped completely in blue blanket appeared in the five centimeter wide gap at the door.
Shockingly white skin.
Clear eyes.
Lonely looking lips.
Thin strands of hair reaching out from under the blanket.
What caught Honoka’s attention more was that frail, fleeting nature of this girl.
These impressions immediately appeared in Honoka’s sights.
Beside her, Koremitsu heaved a sigh of relief.
“It’s great that you’re willing to open the door, Yū. This is my classmate, Shikibu…”
Honoka tried her best to show her most cheery expression, and just when she was about to greet…
“—!”
Yū suddenly went pale as her expression froze, her eyes brimming with terror, and the blanket draped on her trembled like a wave in the midst of a storm.
This unexpected response startled Koremitsu.
“What’s with you?”
He said as he held the door.
But Yū was not staring at Koremitsu, but at Honoka behind him.
She was looking at Honoka… and the wet umbrella in her hands…
“NO!”
Her trembling lips let out these words of rejection in fear.
She held the door handle with both hands and slammed the door shut.

Cluck. The sound of the door being locked rang, followed by Yū's sobbing.
"No… I don't want to go to school! I don't have an umbrella; I can't go out! I can't go to school! There's nothing to cover me! I'll be eaten! I'll be eaten up!"
Honoka never heard such an anguished, poignant outcry before.
In her shock, she suddenly recalled the reason why Yū refused to go to school.
Perhaps… no, definitely.
"Yū! What's with you!? OPEN UP! YŪ!"
Koremitsu continued to knock on the door and twist the handle, panicking to a point where he nearly damaged the door again.
Honoka grabbed Koremitsu's hand from behind.
"Akagi, let's go back for today."
"What are you saying!? Isn't it obvious that Yū doesn't look okay now?" Koremitsu said with an agitated look.
"It's probably… because of me."
"What?"
Koremitsu gave a sceptical look.
"I'll explain later. Anyway, it'll be better to leave this place first; Kanai can calm down if you do so. Just listen to me."
Honoka spoke with an adamant expression and tone as she held onto Koremitsu's cold and stiff hand tightly.
It seemed Koremitsu was unwilling to accept this predicament, but he suddenly glanced diagonally upwards in surprise, and then…
"…Yū, I'll visit you another day."
Dejected, he leaned on the door and said this.

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—It's best that you follow what Miss Shikibu says.

Hikaru said.
He showed an anguished expression, ostensibly enduring the pain.
This guy hasn't given a single thought about Yū up till now, and now he's pretending to be concerned? Koremitsu was actually very displeased with Hikaru, and decided not to ask the latter for help, but Honoka's insistent tone and Hikaru's expression were forcing him to relent, and he could only endure this heartache as he left Yū's apartment.

Koremitsu and Honoka arrived at a park nearby.
The gardens had lush trees planted within, flowerbeds and pools with red bricks surrounding them, and a stage with a roof nearby. They went to the stage for shelter, and Honoka started talking about that incident.
"Kanai started to absent herself from school since the rainy season last year… did you know?"
Honoka herself too was in shock, but she continued to stare at Koremitsu with a worried expression.

“Yeah.”
“That time, Kanai was bullied by the others, like say, her items were hidden by people, she was looked down upon, and some deliberately said such vicious lines… the ones who kept bullying her, were all girls.”
“Why girls?”
Don’t you understand…the wry expression on Honoka’s face seemed to lament this.
“Someone once saw Kanai share an umbrella with a very popular upperclassman in High School. I guess it’s because that upperclassman is a premier noble even in the school, and Kanai was just an ordinary person who managed to enter the school through examinations in Middle School. Everyone said that Kanai approached him herself to leapfrog herself.”
“What nonsense is that? Is there a need for such vicious words just because they shared an umbrella on a rainy day!? What’s wrong about getting in through the exam? What’s wrong with being born in an ordinary family!?”
“…hm, it’s really unreasonable, but… I did mention it the last time we talked about Her Highness Aoi. Our school really pays attention to when each student enrolls, and even segregates them in social classes like this… those people definitely won’t allow someone to break this boundary…”

— Many of the people on our school’s campus enrolled since kindergarten can be classified as ‘nobles’.

Koremitsu recalled the words Honoka said when she discussed about Aoi with him.
Also, when the art club members confessed their resentfulness of Aoi.

—Are you looking down on us because you think you’re a ‘noble’ who’s been in the school since kindergarten?

All the issues like family background were asinine.
Those had nothing to do with personalities.
But the undeniable fact was that the consciousness of social classes was deeply rooted in this school.
And Yū broke the rule.
As a peasant, she managed to latch on to a ‘noble’ male, and was hurt as a result.
In fact, one would have to wonder whether Yū took the initiative, or the upperclassman did… considering how introverted Yū was, Koremitsu felt it would be impossible for her to approach the upperclassman while hoping to scale up the ranks.
However, the others in the school did not care about this; they merely cared about how Yū shared an umbrella with a man of different hierarchy. The girls with a higher standing naturally would not be happy, and the girls who were of the same social class could not forgive her for ‘having a head start’.

— If I go to school, everyone will give me icy stares, and even say some bad things around me.

—I'll be alone in school.
Yū said this with a shudder while crouched underneath the blanket.
A serene girl like Yū must have felt it unbearable seeing so many stares of hatred from strangers, and hearing so many spiteful words and mockery.
Koremitsu too felt as if there was a scald on his chest.
He was frustrated that he could not help Yū back then, and clenched his fists in distraught.
"The boys too pretended not to notice anything when the girls bullied her. It's like they didn't want to get smeared or something."
Honoka spoke with a heavy tone.
Something happened that time.
One morning, there was a heavy downpour, and Yū's umbrella disappeared suddenly.
Just when Yū stood in front of the umbrella rack with a crying face, the girls who loved to bully her most snickered and said lots of cruel things to her.
"Ah, your umbrella's gone? It was there in the morning."
"Go find a guy who'll share one with you."
"Yeah. You're somebody who knows how to bewitch men anyway."
"But upperclassman Tōjō doesn't want to be bothered with such commoners hitching on the nobility's position."
And all sorts of random chatter.
Yū's face paled upon hearing them, and could not say a single thing as she simply wept, shuddered and walked out of the school campus alone.
Many students saw her completely drenched. Her expression hollow like a living corpse as she trudged on.
But nobody shared an umbrella with her.
The next day, Yū did not attend school.
"And then… another major thing happened in school that day."
Honoka's tone was filled with tension.
Koremitsu too held his breath in anticipation.
The clouds covered the park's stage and greenery in shadows, and the rain increased with intensity.
"Someone… saw a vengeful spirit."
(Vengeful spirit?)
How could there be such a thing on this world? Koremitsu thought, but Hikaru's soul was floating beside him, hovering silently under the lights of the street lamps.
And Honoka's expression was dead serious.
"The girls who mocked Kanai in front of the umbrella rack lost their umbrellas, and their umbrellas were dangling on the window sill of the chemistry classroom like dead ghosts… splashed with black water."

Koremitsu tried to imagine that scene.
The school's chemistry classroom.
The window covered with rain.
The dangling umbrellas and the black water that dropped.
It certainly was scary.
However,
Koremitsu frowned.
"Isn't it too farfetched to say they met a vengeful spirit?"
"But that's not all."
"There's still more?"
Honoka nodded with a serious look, and seemed to have difficulty talking.
"Also, someone saw… Kanai running through the rain while holding an umbrella. Her body was dirty all over, her hair was wet and messy, and her expression… didn't seem normal. It felt very scary…"
"I thought Yū didn't attend school that day?"
"Right, that's why there was a rumor going on that Kanai's living spirit came back for revenge."
Koremitsu really could not understand.
Yū's living spirit suddenly came out for revenge, and dirtied the umbrellas of those girls who bullied her?
How could such a thing happen?
Besides, would Yū really have the courage to take revenge? If her personality was that feisty, she would not be hiding inside the house all day long, and would have started a new life.
In fact, Yū seemed terrified of the classmates who bullied her, and he could not detect any trace of malice.
The way she exclaimed 'I'll be eaten up' resembled more of an inerasable fear with regards to this intangible vengeful spirit.
(What's going on…)
Koremitsu gritted his teeth as he thought.
The only thing he could be certain of was that because of the mass bullying, Yū was terrified of rain, and shut herself in.
And nobody stood up to protect her.
What expression would Hikaru have shown if he heard this? Koremitsu would clearly be fuming if he saw Hikaru's forsaken expression, so he resisted the urge to look in that direction.
However, his rage rose up his throat in a surging manner, and his abdomen was throbbing.
He held his breath as he listened to Honoka's words.
"Kanai closed the door in fear probably because she recalled that incident."
Raining.
Umbrella.
Girl in uniform.
(How did that…)
Those triggered Yū's fear.

“Akagi…”
Honoka saw the grim expression on Koremitsu’s face as he clenched his fists, and called out worriedly,
“I’ll find a way regarding Kanai’s matter. Don’t act impulsively for now. The Matriarch Asa and the Head of Teaching Staff have their sights on you.”
“…Got it.”
Koremitsu sighed heavily, and growled,
“Thanks for accompanying me, and sorry for dragging you into this. I’m reflecting over this, and I hope this won’t cause you any trouble.”
“I don’t find this troublesome at all! Your opinion of me is now too low! Why don’t you rely on me more!?”
Honoka glared at Koremitsu as she said that.
That was a ferocious expression Yū definitely would not have.
“Thanks.”
Koremitsu bowed to her.
“If there’s any more problems, I’ll talk to you again.”
Honoka continued to stare at Koremitsu, her expression divided between worry and doubt.
The rain showed no signs of relenting.
“Sorry, Shikibu. You can head back first.”
“…what about you?”
“I’ll check on Yū first before heading back. I won’t do anything rash.”
Honoka gave a serious expression as she remained silent, and after a while, said,
“If I go back together… Kanai will definitely be terrified. I-I’ll accompany you until the apartment. You don’t have an umbrella anyway. I’ll wait there for you.”
“It’s fine. I’ll just buy one from the convenience store.”
Honoka raised her eyebrows as she stared at Koremitsu. Then, she pushed the handle of the wet folded umbrella into his hand.
“Use this.”
“What about you?”
“I’ll call home and get someone to pick me up. Otherwise, I’ll go to the convenience store to buy an umbrella or a raincoat.”
“This is your umbrella. Use it for yourself.”
Koremitsu wanted to return the umbrella to Honoka, but she pushed it back at him with more force.
“No, you definitely won’t buy an umbrella. Use it now, or I’ll go with you! I won’t just follow you till Kanai’s apartment; I’ll send you to your house while holding the umbrella.”
Honoka seemed to be throwing a little tantrum.
Do I look that feeble right now?
Just when Koremitsu was in self-doubt…
A white pretty hand rested gently on both Honoka and Koremitsu’s arms.
A clear delightful voice rang in the rain.

“Thank you. We will borrow it as a talisman.”
Hikaru showed a gentle smile that could melt the gloom in Koremitsu’s heart, and said softly,
“Right, Koremitsu?”
His golden, glittering, transparent hair was not drenched as he stood under the bright road lights, and fluttered beside his clear white cheeks. He raised his lips, smiled gently, and said this to Koremitsu with a mature expression.
(Why must you interrupt here?)
Koremitsu rolled his eyes at Hikaru,
“Then… I’ll use it… as a talisman.”
He said gingerly.
I’m not listening to Hikaru’s advice. This isn’t it…
Honoka’s hands and expression immediately relaxed as she showed a teary look, but she again immediately showed her usual feisty look.
“Right, it’ll definitely work.”
Her cheeks blushed as she said cheerily, and she pushed the umbrella to Koremitsu’s chest.
She was ostensibly saying, take it.
Koremitsu’s heart immediately lifted.
“Thank you…”
He said softly in an embarrassed manner, and opened the bright red and purple umbrella.

With Honoka waving him goodbye, Koremitsu walked into the cold rain and head for Yū’s apartment.
The apartment’s lights were not switched on as he could only see pitch darkness through the window.
With an uneasy feeling, he approached the door, and tapped it,
“Yū…”
A hoarse voice rang.
“Are you inside, Yū?”
A slight sound came from within the door; the anxiety and grief nearly caused his heart to explode.
“Sorry, I shouldn’t have brought Shikibu along without informing you. But she’s a good person, different from those who bullied you.”
A soft sound came from behind the door.
“If you promise to go to school, Shikibu will definitely help you.”
The continual downpour drowned out Koremitsu’s voice, rendering it into fragments.
What can I say to remove Yū’s fear? What exactly can I do for her?
At this point, Hikaru too was beside Koremitsu, but the latter deliberately chose not to look in his direction. He did not want to ask for his help either way.
At this moment, a weak voice came from behind the door.

“…without an umbrella… I can’t go to school.”
The voice seemed to originate from somewhere close. Yū was behind the door. Koremitsu’s heart immediately raised, and he pricked his ears hard.
“That umbrella’s… my talisman… something that can provide shelter for me… but the umbrella is gone now…”
There was sobbing mixed with the voice. Yū was crying.
“I always… had the same dream… that the sea surface is rippling, that the waves are becoming tall… that there’s a black fish opening its mouth wide, and swallowing the umbrella whole. I wanted to grab onto the umbrella, but I couldn’t catch it… and then, even I was eaten up whole by the fish. I was discovered because my umbrella’s gone… I can’t escape…”
What could he do to stop Yū’s tears?
Would Yū ever have the courage to open the door again?
Hikaru remained silent.
He was being a busybody a moment before, but at this point, he simply stood silently beside Koremitsu.
She’s someone important to you! And you’re saying that you can’t do anything because you’re a ghost! You can see and hear, and yet you’re not doing anything at all! You’re just keeping your mouth shut, frowning away! I won’t rely on someone like you again!
Koremitsu leaned his head on the door, and exclaimed,
“DON’T CRY, YŪ! I…I’LL GET YOUR UMBRELLA BACK FOR YOU!”

Chapter 5 - The Excuses of a Noble

Is it possible to get back an umbrella that was lost a year ago?
(Logically, it should have been thrown away long ago…)
The next day, Koremitsu went to Yū's classroom.
They were both in their first year of High School, but as there were a lot of students in their academic year, her classroom was very far from Koremitsu's, located on the second floor.
There was an umbrella rack at the wall on the side of the corridor, and there were two to three umbrellas in there. The weather was pleasant, and the clear sunlight shining through the window was blinding.
There was a continuous downpour since morning on the day when Yū's umbrella went missing, so there must have been a lot of umbrellas in there.
But only Yū's umbrella disappeared.
Did the people who loved to torment Yū hide the umbrella?
But their umbrellas disappeared the next day, and were found dangling in the chemistry classroom.

—Someone… saw a vengeful spirit

—There was a rumor going on that Kanai's living spirit came back for revenge.

Koremitsu did not believe such absurd words.
But who exactly hung the umbrellas in the chemistry classroom?
Who was the one who stole Yū's umbrella? Or is it something else…
The window was opened, and a draft blew in immediately. The plants in the vast school yard were dazzling after being washed by the rain yesterday, and the lively voices of the students could be heard as well.
It was such a peaceful scenery.
(…to think that there're bullying incidents in such a pretty and wholesome school.)
He was bitter about it.
When he was in Middle School, there were often delinquents from other schools who would trouble him, or even look for fights.

Most of the time, there were many opponents, and he was alone. He hated to run away, and did not want to surrender to the despicable them, who cowardly armed themselves and ganged up on him. Thus, he would try his best to fight back.
He thought such a thing would not happen again in High School…
However, he did not expect such a hideous act in such a peaceful school.
Normally, if there were simple-minded delinquents looking for trouble with him, he could have settled it on the spot. Bullying was something done behind the scenes however, so it felt scarier.
Perhaps the more irreproachable it seemed on the surface, the more the opposite was true.
Perhaps they wanted to cover things up with a clean impression as the inside was too dirty.
Just when Koremitsu stared at the empty umbrella rack with a sharp expression,

"Ah! A-Akagi…"

A startled voice came from behind.
The class rep with braids was standing behind Koremitsu, and the eyes under the lens were widened.
"Wh-wha-what are you doing here?"
"I'm about to ask you why are you so startled."
"I-I-I-I-I-I-I was looking for Class 8's representative to discuss about the next class representative, and saw you staring at another class' umbrella rack on the way here… if you intend to install a bomb, I'll advise you not to do so here… no, please don't do it anywhere."
The class rep backed away tentatively as she advised, fulfilling her duty as the class representative.
(Bomb… what kind of person does she see me as!?)
He lost all strength to be annoyed, and his shoulders fell.
At this moment, a children's song 'Uncle Policeman Dog' rang in Michiru's skirt pocket.
"Woah!"
Michiru panicked as she hurriedly took out her cellphone, and saw there was a new message on the screen.
Do you have to use such a tune… just when Koremitsu was dumbfounded by this, he suddenly noticed Michiru's expression turning pale.
Something similar seemed to have happened before.
There was an anonymous chain-email sent to Honoka's cellphone, talking about Hikaru's death.
"Hey, what's going on?"
"Erm, I just received a strange email."
With her trembling hands, Michiru showed the cellphone screen to Koremitsu.

And upon seeing this, Koremitsu was furious.

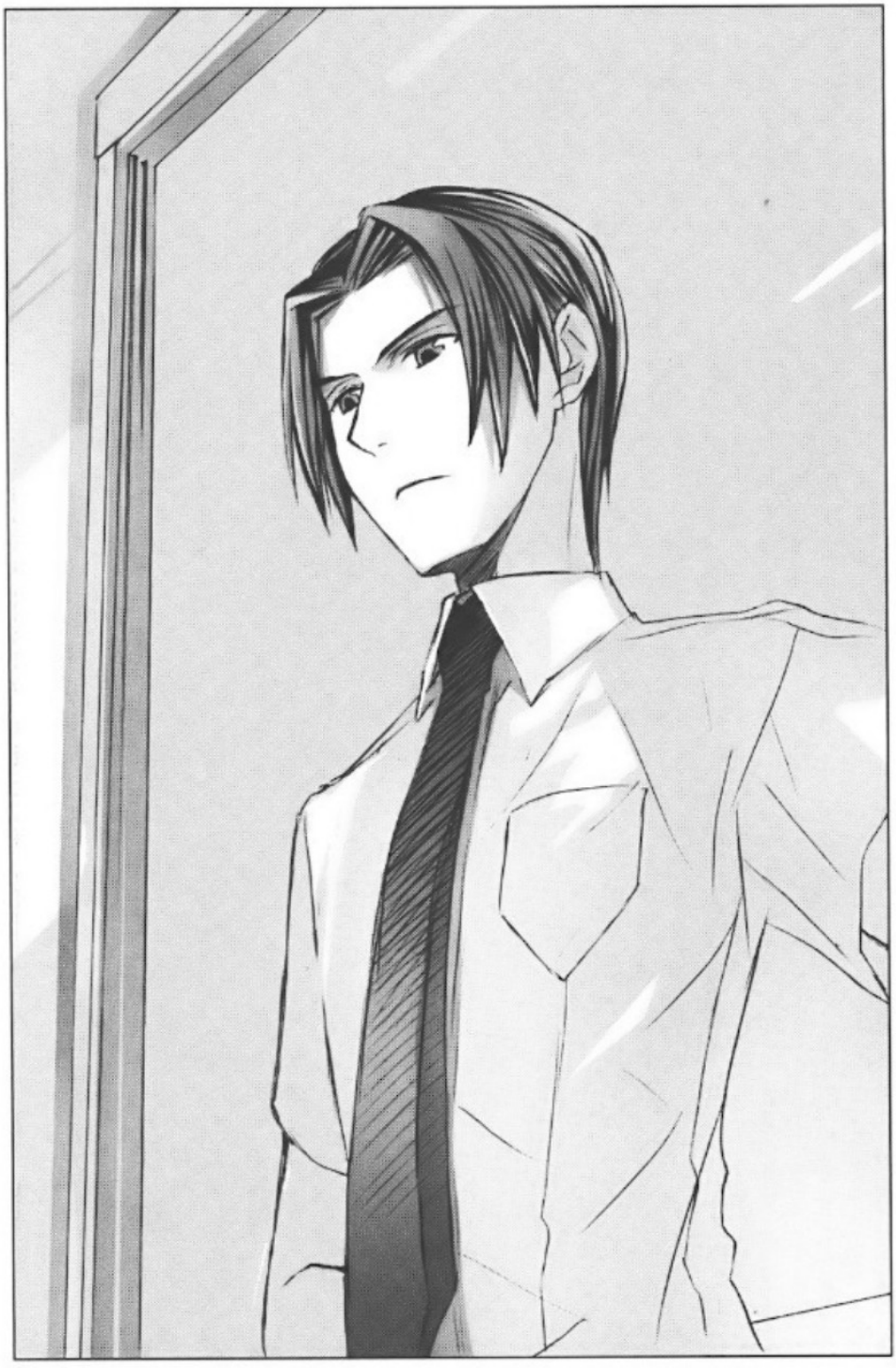
“The women who were with Lord Hikaru. First Act: ‘Yū Kanai’.”

“Give me that!”
Koremitsu snatched Michiru’s cellphone and read carefully.
“The vengeful spirit who refuses to attend school. Is Yū Kanai’s living spirit the one who killed Lord Hikaru?”
The content of the email was enough to make his head boil over.
(Damn it! Who sent this email!? I won’t forgive him!)
He returned the cellphone back to the terrified looking Michiru, and with a dark aura surrounding him, he stomped off.

Michiru, who was left alone, was looking around with a pale expression.
“W-w-w-wh-wha-what should I do? He looks really angry for some reason~ maybe he’ll go bomb someone. If someone from our class does such a thing, I will have to bear responsibility as the class rep. Wahh, th-that’s right! Got to notify Hono first! She’s strong since she learnt kick boxing at a gym, and she did beat up Akagi before. HONOOO~ AKAGI’S UP TO NO GOOD AGAIN!!!”
She hollered as she dashed back to her classroom again.

And so, Koremitsu—
“Yū’s not some vengeful spirit! I’ll prove that to everyone!”
His face was numb, and his eyebrows were raised higher than usual. All students within two meters ran away in fear.
“Who’s the one spreading such stupid messages around? What’s his aim?”
He grumbled on.
“Maybe that person didn’t have an objective in mind, but just wants to see everyone being toyed by these rumors.”
A solemn voice came from beside.
Koremitsu glanced over slightly, and stared at Hikaru’s melancholic face that was looming forward.
He immediately looked away and bit his lips.
(I won’t bother asking you here. Since you love to act like a ghost, I’ll just pretend that you’re a ghost.)
He grumbled.
He walked towards the third year classroom with fixated eyes.
He was going to meet Shungo Tōjō, the one they said Yū was trying to latch upon.
The students standing on the corridor were two years older than he was, and they resembled more like adults.
“Hey, isn’t that the freshman they’re talking about?”
“Why is he at the third year classrooms?”

“He really looks vicious. I heard he had been harassing the Prince for quite a while. Has our school fallen so much that we let such a hoodlum move around?
“I heard he was the one who killed Lord Hikaru. Is that true?”
There were icy stares from all around, as if they found an intruder.
Koremitsu did not back down as he raised his chin.
“I’m looking for a guy called Tōjō.”
He said at the classroom entrance, and there was an immediate buzz.
The students exchanged troubled looks with each other. “It’s better if we report this to the teachers as soon as possible…” somebody even muttered this.
At this moment, with stares upon him, a male student approached Koremitsu.
It was a handsome man.
His back was straight, and his walking posture was full of flair.
His black hair was combed neatly.
He had a masculine chin line, and his facial features were well chiseled.
His prim attire, fluid motions, and arrogant expression reeked of nobility.
Koremitsu frowned. He felt uncomfortable all over, as if his scabbed wounds were being scratched apart again.
“I’m Tōjō.”



The deep, sonorous voice was dolorous to Koremitsu's ears as well.
"Upperclassman Tōjō's ability to charm women is on par with Lord Hikaru's."
Honoka did say this before.
However, he was a completely different person from the latter.
This man in front of him did not have the gentle sense of transparency Hikaru had, and did not have the charisma that would soothe anyone.
There was a more masculine vibe to him, and he did not seem to be a youth, but a matured man. However, as he was already two years older than Hikaru, this impression was to be expected.
Once both of them moved to the corridor, Koremitsu went straight to the point.
"I've something to ask you. It's about Yū Kanai."
Tōjō frowned.
"I have nothing to say about that incident."
"I heard that Yū refused to come to school because you two shared the same umbrella."
Tōjō gave Koremitsu a cold stare.
"Ahh, that certainly was the case. But she merely shared an umbrella with me on a rainy day and walked with me for 10 minutes. Her refusing to come to school is her own personal matter, and there certainly is no need for me to be questioned by you."
"What are you say-"
Koremitsu was completely infuriated by this.
What nonsense is this pretentious bastard actually saying!? It's her own business that she refuses to come to school? Are you saying you don't need to bear any responsibility!?
"That is just inappropriate behaviour done by a few girls in the minority. Once she stopped attending school, the slurs and slanders about our relationship disappeared, but she still refused to come to school even now. Thus, it is her personal matter."
"The reason why Yū doesn't dare to come to school is because someone hung the umbrellas of those girls who bullied her, and now there are rumors that she called in a vengeful spirit."
"Isn't that even less of my concern?"
Tōjō answered coldly and showed an aloof attitude.
Koremitsu felt his face stiffen and his breathing become hurried.
Tōjō however continued with his logical, business-like attitude,
"Are you implying that I toyed with Yū Kanai's emotions and abandoned her? Let me make this clear, I am very clear on exactly what kind of woman I should go out with. My type is only those born in the rich and privileged, well-nurtured princesses with excellent upbringing. My relatives definitely will not accept girls that came in after Middle School, or even from families running small and medium Enterprises. Even if I really do, the differences in social classes on both sides will wear us out. I definitely can't date such a

person seriously. Why do those girls not understand this, and yet continue to envy Yū Kanai?”
Tōjō sighed with exasperation. In his furor, Koremitsu punched him in the face.
Tōjō tumbled backwards, his back slamming into the wall. At this moment, Koremitsu grabbed him by the collar and yelled,
“HAVE YOU HAD ENOUGH!? YŪ’S STILL TERRIFIED WHEN SHE SEES GIRLS WEARING SCHOOL UNIFORM, AND SHE’LL THINK OF HOW SHE WAS BULLIED! SHE’LL CUDDLE UNDER THE BLANKET AND SHUDDER WHENEVER SHE SEES RAIN, SAYING THAT SHE CAN’T GO OUT WITHOUT AN UMBRELLA! THAT MAY JUST BE SOME STUPID THING SOME FOOLISH WOMEN DID FROM YOUR PERSPECTIVE, JUST A THING OF THE PAST, BUT YŪ’S STILL NOT RELEASED FROM THAT PAST! SHE LOCKED HERSELF IN THE DARK ROOM FOR THIS PAST YEAR, SUFFERING ALONE, AND YOU DARE SAY THIS HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH YOU!?”
Yū was so timid that she covered her entire body with the blanket, whimpering, “I don’t want to go to school.”
She shuddered, and said that she rather starve to death than go to school.
Her face was deathly pale as she panicked from the mere sight of Honoka holding an umbrella—
What do you mean it has nothing to do with you!?
Koremitsu was completely infuriated.
Since he felt that Yū was not someone he should go out with, why must he share an umbrella with her?
Koremitsu did not know whether Yū took the initiative in approaching Tōjō, or that the latter did it on impulse.
But it did not matter who started it.
(But why didn’t you refuse her!? Why did you brazenly share the umbrella with her!?)
Since you feel that she’s not someone worth going out with for real because of the differences in family background, why did you approach her so casually!? If you don’t want to bear responsibility, why did you do that!?
He wrecked Yū’s daily life without remorse, and did not step up to protect her.
Such a man had no right to mention Yū’s name!
Koremitsu exerted strength in his hands as he forcefully grabbed Tōjō by the collar.
Tōjō winced.
A crowd started to gather, and even a teacher came by. The bell chime indicating the end of break time rang, clearly dissonant from this tense standoff.
Tōjō pushed Koremitsu’s hand aside,
“It’s fine.”
He told the teacher with an unnatural voice.

The teacher gave Tōjō a troubled look, and then looked over at Koremitsu again.
Tōjō quickly tidied his hair and ruffled clothes.
“The tests are about to begin. You should hurry back to your own classroom too.”
After saying that, he left.
“H-hurry off now,” the teacher stammered.
Koremitsu continued to glare at Tōjō for quite a while, before he turned back and ran off.

Upon seeing Koremitsu dash back to the classroom, Honoka heaved a sigh of relief.
However, his expression was menacingly solemn, and she frowned worriedly. For the entire test period, she kept glancing over at Koremitsu.
The latter was scribbling hard, apparently venting his rage towards Tōjō.
The graph on the maths tests resembled Tōjō’s face, and Koremitsu continued to groan as his eyes scorched with rage from time to time.
The test ended, and once break came, he still looked unappeased.
“Akagi…”
Honoka called him,
“I-I’m fine.”
Koremitsu muttered, dragged the door aside, and walked out of the classroom.
He was headed for the toilet, and as he continued to splash water onto his face at the basin, the water splattered everywhere.
Once the other students entered and discovered the red-haired delinquent washing his face with a massive killing intent, they ran away and they did not dare to use the toilet.
The contracting and swirling feeling of his organs did not dissipate however, and Koremitsu started to be furious with himself.
“Let’s go to school. If anyone bullies you, I’ll beat him up good.”
The moment he said these words, Yū merely stared at him timidly.
Beating others up was not going to solve this matter; it was not so simple.
I knew that—he was vexed by his shallow awareness. If he had punched Tōjō in front of Yū, he would have terrified her. The moment he thought of this, he started to regret…
He probably spent more than 5 minutes washing his face.
Once his mind finally managed to calm down, he was drenched all over, and yet his throat was parched. What was reflected on the mirror was someone with a savage expression and dripping, messy hair.
Hikaru could not be seen on the mirror, but Koremitsu knew he was probably standing behind with a relaxed look.

“You don’t have to worry.”

A gentle voice came from behind.
Koremitsu grabbed the basin by both sides as he glared at the mirror. He did not want to look back no matter what.

"…I suppose it's good that Mr Shungo got punched once."

A comforting voice entered Koremitsu's ears.
"As the heir of the Tōjō family, I suppose nobody in this school would dare to beat Mr Shungo up."
(That guy knew who he was…?)
Koremitsu wanted to look back, but he still held onto the edge of the basin as he resisted the urge.
(Damn it, who's going to listen to you here!? It's useless even if you try to act sincere!)
He gritted his teeth in pain, but he was certainly curious about Hikaru's relationship with Tōjō.
Hikaru ostensibly did not notice the complication in Koremitsu's heart, and he continued with a tranquil voice,
"Mr Shungo's family—the Tōjō family had always assisted the Mikado family. You have probably heard of the Mikado Group, I suppose? It has a large scale of operations that includes banks as well; and the Chairman is the head of the Mikado family, my father. However, some said that the ones controlling the Mikado Group is not the titular person, but the Tōjō family that was doing the actual operations. In other words, the relationship between me, born out of wedlock… and Mr Shungo, may be a little complicated…"
So one of them was the son of a Corporate Magnate, while the other was the heir of the family running the Corporation? If Hikaru were a prince, Tōjō would be the Chancellor's son?
Koremitsu did not want to listen, but he could not help but do so. If he covered his ears or yelled at him to be quiet, he would be admitting Hikaru's existence…
"Also, Mr Shungo is Miss Aoi's cousin."
(Aoi's!?)
"On a side note, the cousin of the sister-in-law of the husband of Mr Shungo's father's third sister is the nephew of Asa's father's cousin's cousin."
"THIS RELATIVE RELATIONSHIP IS TOO COMPLICATED! WHO IN THE WORLD WILL UNDERSTAND THIS!!!???"
Uh oh! I wanted to pretend that I didn't hear this, but I couldn't help but react at this! Koremitsu hurriedly closed his mouth and stared at the basin.

“Yeah, the family relationship between those people is really hard to understand. Do you want me to slowly explain it to you?”

Suddenly, another person’s voice rang.
And it came from the toilet cubicle!
The door with a ‘faulty’ sign stuck on it opened with a creak, and a busty petite girl hopped out from within, shocking Koremitsu.
“WHA! YOU—THIS IS THE MALE’S TOILET!”
“So?”
Hiina Oumi of the news club was holding onto a toilet brush, smiling as she leaned onto Koremitsu, and continued in her usual rapid-fire manner,
“One of my hobby is to collect information while scrubbing the toilet in a lavatory. A lavatory is a place where anyone could relax, reveal their true selves, and spill out their inner secrets. Occasionally, I can find out about some things like lynchings or extortions, so it’s really intense! How about you hide inside the toilet with me next time, Akagi? You’ll definitely see the new world!”
“I don’t want to know about that kind of thing. Don’t stick to me with that toilet scrub in your hand. Get out.”
Koremitsu wanted to push Hiina aside, but she clung onto him with her extremely elastic breasts and thighs.
“It isn’t good to be so aloof, is it? I’m capable in other things besides cleaning the toilet. You seem to be troubled when you muttered to yourself. I might be able to provide information you want to know.”
“Wh-what do you mean?”
Hiina lifted her head, and her large eyes were staring at Koremitsu with hidden intent in them. He was shocked by the way she changed from a tempting little devil to a cheeky youth.
“It means that I can help explain the role Lord Hikaru plays in the Mikado family, and whoever gets the most benefits—after Lord Hikaru’s death.”
Koremitsu felt a jolt within, and nearly looked over at Hikaru, only to stop himself, “It’s none of my business” and quietly reminded himself.
“I don’t need! And aren’t you being too suspicious here.”
“Eh!? Such words really hurt my heart! I’m already being so honest, so what are you unhappy about, Akagi?”
“Normally, girls won’t dare to look at me in the eyes, and will run away upon seeing me. But you took the initiative to approach me, and you’re not scared of me. It’s really weird, and stop sticking onto me.”
Hiina backed away from Koremitsu, and showed a sorrowful expression.
“Such thinking… it really is a pity. You actually think that every woman who approaches you have some devious ploy.”
“Uu…”
Upon seeing her show a serious expression and speak with a soft tone, Koremitsu was at a loss of words.
(I-I’m not wrong when I say this… probably.)

But Hiina's expression was slowly eroding away his confidence the more he looked on.
"When a woman approaches you, sometimes, it's because she's attracted to you as the opposite gender… don't you feel this way, Akagi?"
(Impossible, definitely not.)
He was unable to hold in his feelings any further, and slowly backed away.
"I'm returning to the classroom. If you want to scrub the toilet, go to the girls'. Maybe you might get praised during morning assembly or something."
"Please don't run away!"
Hiina leapt onto his body.
"Oi!"
The warm fleshy body dripping in sweat was sticking onto Koremitsu, and he was utterly bewildered as he could feel her ample breasts through the thin short-sleeved blouse pressing onto his abdomen.
Hikaru stood beside them, and with a subdued voice,
"I suppose I should ask now, at what point shall I turn around? Can I see the kiss at least?"
Asked calmly.
"FORGET ABOUT IT!"
Koremitsu knew he should have ignored it, but he could not help but yell.
"Relax, I'll make you feel completely good. Just leave it to me."
"Wait, don't stick your face onto my neck! It's itchy!"
"Let me tell you this, Akagi. Yū Kanai 'isn't an unimportant person' to upperclassman Tōjō."
Upon hearing Hiina mutter this at his neck, Koremitsu immediately forgot to resist.
"Because upperclassman Tōjō 'knew that Lord Hikaru would visit Yū Kanai's apartment'… because he viewed Lord Hikaru as…"
Just when Koremitsu was gradually attracted by Hiina's words.

"UWAAAAHHH!"

A scream came from the lavatory's entrance.
"AKAGI DRAGGED A GIRL INTO THE MEN'S TOILET~!!!"
(WHAT!?)
Startled, Koremitsu pushed aside Hiina and ran out of the toilet with a ghastly pale expression. At this moment, there was buzzing on the corridor.
"I heard that delinquent Akagi did it in the toilet!"
"He forcefully brought a girl to such a place and pushed her down here!"
As Koremitsu remained startled, Hiina poked her head out from beside him,
"Wow, so we're an official couple from today onwards. This love that develops from rape sounds like a shōjo manga~"
And gave a hypocritical grin.

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“Congratulations Akagi.”
The Second Year Student Council President of the High School Branch, widely dubbed as the Matriach Asa, Asai Saiga, said to Koremitsu with an icy expression full of humiliation, disgust and ridicule.
“Your lewd act shall be recorded into the annals of the highly prestigious Heian Academy’s dark history, and will live on as a legacy forever.”
All the tests for the day had ended, and after school…
Koremitsu was fuming as he sat on the chair in the student counselling room, staring at Asai in front of him.
(Why is this person the one asking me instead of the teachers? Is the position of the Student Council President this high up?)
“The teachers all trust Asa a lot. Though she will sometimes use her authority to fire bad teachers, or force unruly students to drop out, but she is still just and capable. You don’t have to glare at her with such suspicious look.”
Hikaru was practically begging as he remained behind Koremitsu.
However, as she was someone powerful who could fire teachers and force students to drop out, even as a student, Koremtisu really could not let his guard down.
Even if they’re cousins, isn’t Hikaru too protective of this person!? Of course, Koremitsu chose to ignore Hikaru’s words.
“I said before that I didn’t pull her into the toilet, and I didn’t do anything bad to her. All I did was say a few words.”
“Is there a need to enter the male toilet?”
“Th-there’s a reason for that.”
“And what reason do you have for hugging a girl in the male’s toilet.”
“I didn’t hug her!”
“There were witnesses saying that you forcefully pushed Oumi down without caring about her resistance.”
“THAT’S JUST AN ILLUSION CAUSED BY BIAS!”
“Do they not have this bias because of your usual actions? If we consider everything, there is a possibility of you doing that.”
Asai deliberately raised her voice as she muttered to herself.
“Ugh!!!”
Looking at how the conversation had been going, it seemed he would simply continue to hear her snide comments.
“Anyway, I didn’t do anything. That’s all I want to say. Is there anything else?”
He stood up.
“Wait a moment. There’s still an important thing I haven’t asked.”
Asai said sternly.
Koremitsu stopped.
She sat on the chair unflinching as her sharp stare matched her voice.
“I heard you punched Tōjō?”

Tōjō was a third year, and was older than Asai, but she called him by his family name without honorifics.
“…that guy did something worth being punched for.”
Koremitsu suppressed his rage as he hissed.
“Is it about Yū Kanai?”
Asai’s question caused Koremitsu’s shoulders to jerk in surprise.
(She knew about everything? I can’t underestimate this woman after all.)
“Yeah.”
Koremitsu did not avoid her stare as he looked straight at her.
Asai raised her lips slightly.
“Because Hikaru went to Yū Kanai’s house when he was alive?”
“…yeah.”
“It looks like you’re still pretending to be Hikaru’s substitute.”
There was scathing criticism and impatience in her tone.
Koremitsu held his breath.

—It’s impossible for you to express Hikaru’s feelings.

What Asai said in the past appeared in his mind again.
Asai showed a vicious expression just as the one she showed back then, and continued,
“Someone as shallow as you will never ever understand Hikaru’s true wishes and hopes.”
If he had heard this line a week ago, he definitely would have argued with her till his dying breath.
He would have proudly said, Hikaru and I are friends, and since he requested me for help, I want to help pass his feelings.
But at this point, upon hearing Asai’s words, he did not have any confidence at all.
He really did not know what Hikaru was thinking.
He did not know what the latter was trying to get him to do, what Hikaru felt when the request to meet Yū was made, and did not know why Hikaru chose to remain oblivious about Yū. He did not understand Hikaru’s wishes, expectations, love life and so on.
He did not want to look back at Hikaru, who was eavesdropping on their conversation.
“…Hikaru really values Yū, and even if he dies, he won’t let Yū remain in the house forever. H-Hikaru’s really worried about Yū.”
Asai showed a sneer on her lips.
‘You say that Hikaru really values Yū Kanai? She’s just one of the numerous playmates to him. No, perhaps she might not even be a playmate.”
(This woman… actually knew of the relationship between Hikaru and Yū?)
Koremitsu’s stomach churned, and Hikaru did not say anything as he stood behind. Normally, this person would interject even on the slightest matter, and he chose to remain silent at this point?

“No, Hikaru really values her. Why would that harem prince go to a girl’s house when the girl can’t possibly strip and make out with him?”
Koremitsu argued vehemently as he glared back.
Asai frowned as she showed disdain.
“Your verbal etiquette is really crude.”
“Yeah, I’m not some high-class noble after all.”
“So that’s why you sniff around like a dog? Do you not know how dangerous and foolish this is?”
“What do you mean?”
“I’m saying you’ll have a vengeful spirit sticking to you.”
Asai snapped back.
Koremitsu was speechless by the boldness in Asai’s declaration, and she continued with a stern warning tone,
“Do you think that they don’t exist? In fact, there are such vengeful spirits in this school, whether in the past, or now. Yū Kanai is devoured by that thing; because of the rumors that she bewitched Tōjō, the envy and malice of the girls became a sentient apparition that attacked her. Things didn’t end there; even the girls who bullied her were hurt by this apparition as well. It continues to spread through the ears and mouth, creating new vengeful spirits as well. Akagi, if you continue to dig up that incident and remind everyone of it, you will bring about new rumors of malice, and this will not only bring no benefit to Yū Kanai, but also damage the reputation of Hikaru, who got involved with her, and wreck the order of the school. As Hikaru’s cousin, and the Student Council President of the High School branch, I definitely won’t sit back and watch you carry out your misdeeds.“
Asai sat upright, and her tone was calm and clear; she was a splitting image of Tōjō , and that infuriated Koremitsu.
But she was correct. These vengeful spirits are definitely built up from the dark emotions within the human heart.
His actions will definitely trigger a new wave of chaos and rumors in the school.
Asai’s worries were logical.
“Even so, if I leave her alone, Yū will never be able to shake off this vengeful spirit!”
Whenever he recalled the sight of Yū, cuddled under the blanket and sobbing away, his skin and chest would tear apart from the pain, and his head and heart will heat up.
“One year ago, nobody protected Yū.”
All the people in this school abandoned that fragile and kind girl.
Hikaru too said he was a helpless ghost after bringing Koremitsu to her, and did not interfere.
At this point, Koremitsu did not understand what sort of feelings Hikaru had for Yū, and what sort of promise he made with her.
Perhaps it was just as Asai had said, that he had no right to be Hikaru’s representative.

But none of these matter—

“I’LL PROTECT HER THIS TIME! IF THERE’S A VENGEFUL SPIRIT, I’LL BEAT IT UP GOOD SO THAT IT WON’T APPROACH YŪ AGAIN!!”

This intense emotion that rose up his throat was real.
No matter what Hikaru thought of Yū, It doesn’t matter. Even if Yū was simply one of Hikaru’s numerous playmates—as Asai had said, I’ll definitely not abandon Yū!
I’ll protect Yū!
I’ll fight with this vengeful spirit until the bitter end, until it runs away crying! I’ll make sure Yū won't show that timid, lonely expression, and live her school life happily!
Asai glared at Koremitsu furiously. She certainly must have felt that he was shallow-minded, but he did not bother with her.
He seized the opportunity to walk out of the student counselling room before he heard any discomforting words.
Behind him,
“Hold it there.”
Asai called out, but he did not stop at all.

Asai bit her lips at the room’s entrance as she watched the back of Koremitsu Akagi leave.
“So cool…”
A teasing tone came from behind the door, and she turned back in shock. Hiina Oumi of the news club was giving a teasing look, and beside her, Honoka Shikibu was showing a pale expression; at this point, Asai inadvertently frowned.

Those two were certainly standing at the student counselling room entrance with the aim to eavesdrop on their conversation. Hiina Oumi had her own motives, while Honoka Shikibu was probably worried about Koremitsu.
“Sorry, I was… just passing through.”
Honoka lowered her head awkwardly as she said this.
Hiina however showed an unperturbed look,
“I’ll protect her—isn’t it? Wow, that’s so moving. Akagi’s really a good man after all. I’m about to fall in love with him.”
She said eagerly.
Honoka, standing beside her, looked startled however.
Asai stared at both of them, looked over at where Koremitsu stormed off to, and said in spite,
“It’s really sickening to see a man who’ll carelessly says he will protect anyone.”

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(I’ll protect Yū!)
It was the midst of the midterms, and there was no one to be seen on the eerily quiet corridors. Koremitsu’s eyes were blazing as he stormed forward in large strides.
“I’ll chase away that spirit and terrify that poker-faced Asai Saiga!”
“I want to see Asa tremble in fear too… but Koremitsu, is this really good?”
A clear voice suddenly rang.
Koremitsu was intent on pretending not to hear Hikaru, but the latter’s heavy sigh and hesitant attitude sparked his concern.
(What? What’s not good about this?)
The awkward silence caused an urge to glance aside, but before Koremitsu could do so, he heard Hikaru’s solemn voice,
“If Yū manages to shake off her vengeful spirit, you will lose her.”
Koremitsu suddenly stopped in his tracks.
He looked back, and found Hikaru’s expression to be as somber as ever.
Hikaru showed a pensive expression as he was seemingly informing Koremitsu of an inevitable disaster, and said,
“I know how to avoid this situation, and I can tell you that. How about it, Koremitsu? Do you want to hear me out?”

Chapter 6 - The Vengeful Spirit is Over There

Honoka switched on her home computer, accessed her homepage, and the luxurious wallpaper and fancy words on the purple wallpaper appeared in her eyes.
This "Purple Princess' Mansion" was a website she set up two years ago, could be navigated through computer or cellphone, and had publications of the novels she wrote.
The enthralling and sickly sweet love stories she wrote were popular with the girls, were highly rated, and her website was a hot favorite.
The author, Purple Princess, was hailed as a love expert, and the blog comments and mailbox were all filled with comments and mails about girls venting their love frustrations, asking the Purple Princess for suggestion.
And so, the Purple Princess—Honoka, personally answered all the questions one by one.

“Hello there, Purple Princess!
I’m a student in my second year of Middle School.
I just started dating with my boyfriend for around a month.
He’s a candid sporty boy, joins the tennis club, will bring me to watch soccer or tennis matches when we’re on dates, and may even play some basketball while we’re on the road.
I feel happy when I go out with him... but I’m completely useless at sports, and I don’t understand when I watch sports□≧д≦□□ Whenever I play tennis with him, I just can’t catch the ball; I really feel like a burden!
But he always tells me, you can improve if you practice more, A-mi, do your best! And will bring me to play tennis again the next week.
I really like him, but if this keeps up, I just feel that it’ll be painful going out with him at this rate!
What can I do? I’m really, really troubled here!
PS:
I’ve read the novel that updated this week! I was really excited when I saw the scene where Takuma chased after Natsuno from behind and hugged her tightly!! □□□▽□□□

“Hello there, Miss A-mi,
It’s really a troubling matter that his interests don’t match yours.
My friend complained before that on dates, she wants to go to pasta and crepes shops, but he would always bring her to ramen shops when she doesn’t want to!
She too is like you, Miss A-mi, in that she likes her boyfriend too, and doesn’t want to make him unhappy. That’s why she didn’t dare say that she prefers pasta.
One day, she finally summoned her courage, and her boyfriend was very surprised by it, Why did you keep quiet about it!? He even chided her angrily for this.
Later, when they dated, they would take turns going to ramen shops and the shops she recommended, and she happily said that though she doesn't like pork ramen, she does find salt ramen to be really delicious.
So, I think you should try talking it through with your boyfriend, Miss A-mi.
You may be scared and nervous.
That's why this Purple Princess will give you an advice.
Before you begin, hold him gently by the hands.
If he's shocked, and asks you "What's the matter?", continue holding his hands, lower your head slightly, show tears in your eyes, and look at him with your most pitiful expression.
You must tell him your thoughts with a feeling that you mustn't let go of those hands. and he'll definitely understand!"

After finishing her reply, Honoka recalled something she did not want to recall, and started feeling depressed again.
She leaned her right cheek on the table, and let out a sigh.
(Why does my heart hurt whenever I think about Akagi…)
On the previous day, when she lent Koremitsu the foldable umbrella at the park's stage, he frowned hesitantly. But after a moment of doubt, his stiff expression suddenly relaxed a little.

—Then… I'll use it… as a talisman.

When he said this line awkwardly, Honoka was nearly moved to tears. Her throat felt a little pricky, but she was still happy, smiling away like a fool.

—Right, it'll definitely work.

After saying that, she pushed the umbrella into Koremitsu's hands.
With a teary, smiling expression, she watched Koremitsu hold her umbrella, and walk into this windy, stormy night scene under the protection of that umbrella.
What was that feeling all about?
That night, she received a message from Koremitsu,

"Sorry to trouble you today.
The umbrella was very useful.
Thanks.
See you at school tomorrow."

The dry content in this message caused a mix of emotions to swirl inside Honoka, and she felt happy yet uneasy within.
(Has he talked to Kanai yet?)
She wanted to ask, but was so terrified that she could not do so, and she did not understand why she was so terrified.

"It's good that I can be of help.
See you tomorrow.
Good night."

She was overwhelmingly hesitant, retyped her message a few times, and only managed to type these words in the end.
After that, she kept waiting, but never received a response.
(Akagi's not that type of person in the first place…)
Honoka clearly knew, but she felt really lonely deep inside.
In the morning, Koremitsu returned the thoroughly dried, carefully folded umbrella to Honoka with both hands.
"Your umbrella really helped me out."
When he bowed deeply, Honoka was staring at the swirl in the middle of that red hair. Her heart suddenly tightened and she felt very sentimental.
"I-It it's nothing, why must you exaggerate it this much? I want to know more about… how Kanai's doing?"
"Ohh…"
Koremitsu averted his eyes and coldly answered,
"I promised Yū that I would find her umbrella."
"Umbrella? Are you talking about that one from one year ago? That's impossible!"
"Even if it's impossible, I have to do it."
Koremitsu said with an adamant tone.
The determination revealed in his eyes as he looked aside caused Honoka to feel unbearable, as if someone squeezed her heart.

After that, Koremitsu squirmed and returned to his seat with an arched back.
Once the first period exam ended, he immediately walked out of the classroom, and did not return for a while.
With a drained expression on her face,
"Akagi is up to no good again, Honoo!"
Michiru ran over to notify her, and right at that moment, the second period bell rang. A while after the exam began, she spotted Koremitsu's return.
He was burning with fury all over, and it seemed he was really unhappy as he frowned while writing on his script.
After the exam ended, he immediately got up and walked out of the classroom.
(Argh, seriously, what's that Akagi doing!?)
Honoka was completely perplexed as she saw this, and was so tense her gut winced.
After that,
"I HEARD AKAGI RAPED A GIRL IN THE MALE TOILET!!!"
Once a certain boy ran into the classroom, yelling this, Honoka practically felt her eyes darken in front of her.
(AKAGI!! JUST WHAT IN THE WORLD ARE YOU DOING HERE~!!!!!!!)
Koremitsu was late for the next period's exam, and never gave Honoka a single glance. Once the exam was over, he was called by a teacher, and walked out of the classroom.
Unable to resist the urge, Honoka pursued him from behind.
As she continued to loiter outside the student counseling room, a petite yet busty short-haired girl called her.
"Are you waiting for Mr Akagi too, Miss Shikibu?"
It was Oumi Hiina of the news club.
She was purportedly the girl whom Koremitsu dragged into the boys toilet.
She, who was once Honoka's classmate in Middle School, pretended to be affectionate with Honoka as she said,
"Why is it that Mr Akagi was the only one called here? Isn't that too unfair? Is President Saiga pretending to use her authority to be alone with him, secretly playing an S&M game?"
Her heart full of doubt, Honoka whispered to Hiina, asking,
"O-Oumi, I heard Akagi rap—what is going on anyway?"
"Oh, that's how it is though. My purity's been stained. Mr Akagi will take responsibility, I suppose?"
Honoka was not amused upon hearing Hiina's joking tone.
"Don't be ridiculous. There's no way Akagi will do that sort of thing! He looks like a delinquent appearance-wise, but he's a real blockhead with an upright personality. He won't care about anything unless it's a girl he likes!"
Once she argued back,
"Ho ho, it looks like you really understand Mr Akagi, Miss Shikibu."

Hiina smiled at Honoka with her eyes narrowed, causing the latter's face to blush all over.
"I-It's nothing. I just discussed some things with Akagi before, so I'm a little concerned about him."
"Discuss? What did you talk about?"
"Nothing to do with you."
As both of them discussed with hushed voices, Koremitsu's outburst suddenly came from behind the door.

“I’LL PROTECT HER THIS TIME!"

Even through the door, these words clearly rang in Honoka's eyes, and pricked her chest.
Hiina waited at the door, eavesdropping inside.
Honoka did not want to listen, but was unable to resist the urge as she too placed her ear at the door.
And immediately, she heard Koremitsu's voice, clearer than ever,

"IF THERE’S A VENGEFUL SPIRIT, I’LL BEAT IT UP GOOD SO THAT IT WON’T APPROACH YŪ AGAIN!!”

The footsteps approached, and the student counseling door suddenly slammed open.
Honoka and Hiina hurriedly ducked behind the door, and Koremitsu did not notice them as that red hair and slightly arched back departed in fury.
Honoka watched him with a nearly broken heart.

“...I’ll protect her, huh?"
With her face sticking to the table, Honoka muttered to herself.
Unknowingly, it started raining outside, and the lonely sound of raindrops could be heard in short bursts.
"So I'm not… the only one."
Her heart started to ache again.
This was not an unbearable sudden pain, but ever since she heard those words from Koremitsu outside the student counseling room, her heart started to ache.
When she had a little scuffle against Asai because of Koremitsu, "If Saiga tries doing anything, I’ll protect you" Koremitsu said to her.
He said it impassionedly, without any pretense, treating it as the divine duty of a man.
It was different from the 'protect' he said adamantly that day.
The 'protect' he said did not have any special significance… why did her heart jump because of it? That was really stupid.
"...I don't have any special feelings for Akagi, he doesn't treat me as a love target, just someone he can discuss things with… I mistook him for a

pervert at first, kicked him… and deliberately chose to ignore him… it doesn't matter to me who he likes…"
That should be the case--
But why was her head hurting so much?
Why was her mind always thinking of Koremitsu?
Honoka sat up and shook her head. She stared at the computer, and found there was a new message on the board.

"This is my first comment.
I've always been concerned about someone, and has been waiting for contact from him. When I don't see him, I feel sad. Why is this so?
I quarrelled with that person the last time.
He said my thinking was wrong, and I was shocked; I felt he did not understand my feelings at all.
That person's completely different from me, and sometimes, I'm really scared of him.
He sent a message to me, apologizing, but I didn't reply.
I hope he'll abandon me, not send a message to me, and not to look for me again.
In that case, I will be able to live my life peacefully again.
But once that person never sent a message to me, I started to worry again, and I feel really lonely.
What is the matter with me exactly?
If we meet, we'll definitely argue with each other again.
That person's words will definitely hurt me.
But I still want to meet him.
I know I'll definitely regret it, but I want to meet him.
I'm still waiting for that person to send me a message.
My heart is really in a mess, and I just can't calm down.
Even if I close my eyes, I can't sleep.
What can I do to become my original self?"

This message coincided with Honoka's feelings, causing the latter to feel heavy-hearted and sad.
Once they met, she would feel anxious.
Even if he was in front of her, she would feel there was a divide between them for some reason.
But when they did not meet, she would always think of him.
In the past, that was definitely not the case.
(Seriously, what will be a good thing to do?)

"What is love, I wonder?"

This voice was feeble, to a point where did it not resemble hers, and she suddenly felt helpless, on the verge of breaking down in tears.

Honoka was supposed to be the one hearing others out, helping others…
However, she felt she was the frustrated one, the one who needs to look to others for help.
(If it's me, what sort of suggestion do I wish to hear? What exactly do I want to do?)
Honoka tentatively typed at her keyboard.

"It will be really difficult to regain your original self, so I can't give an easy answer to you…
But if you honestly face your feelings and try taking a step forward, perhaps you may understand."

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"…try taking a step forward…"
Yū muttered the words on the screen.
There was a clear blue curtain covering the window.
Raindrops continued to patter outside the window.
Yū recalled the feeling of the icy water pattering on her skin, seeping into her clothes, and immediately felt goosebumps rise. She tugged harder at the blanket covering her from head to toe, and cringed.
"I can't do it…"
Yū could take nary a step out.

—Yū, let’s go to school.

Koremitsu said.
He was frowning as if he seemed really angry, and spoke to Yū, who was utterly terrified.

—It’s not normal to keep locking yourself in the room every day, and it’s not good for your health either. The line between reality and delusions will also become vague.

His eyes were blazing like fire as he stared at Yū.

—Better get out and walk before your legs start growing fins!

Yū felt that Hikaru's friend, Koremitsu, was a good person.
At first, she was very terrified of him, with his red hair, savage eyes, and stiff expression, but soon, she realized though his manners were crude, his actions were sincere and gentle.
He brought the rock sugar Yū liked as a gift. He was blushing away when he gave her a transparent puzzle as blue as the sea. He helped her change the light bulb.
Whenever Hikaru looked for her, he would sit at the middle of the room, smiling gently. Koremitsu however seemed to be worried about something

as he sits at the wall near the entrance, slouching his back unhappily. However, ever since Koremitsu appeared there, she started to feel more at ease.
When Koremitsu blushed, saying that he had never fallen in love too, she saw the same loneliness she had in his eyes, and suddenly felt a sense of familiarity between them.
However, he said the one thing Yū did not want to hear.
After the divorce with her father, Yū's mother migrated to Australia for work, and would continue to send messages to her.
All the messages were talking about the same thing, every single time,
"How long are you going to shut yourself at home?"
"You can't possibly lock yourself inside the house forever?"
"You dad has a new family and has a new child; there's no way he'll have time to take care of you. You're 16 now, how about you wise up?"
Yū's mother would keep telling her to be more mature, telling her this was the right thing to do, but upon seeing such commanding lines, Yū felt heaviness in her body, her body ostensibly sucked into the darkness of an abyss.
Recently, whenever Yū's mother sent a message, Yū would delete them all without reading.
She always felt it was difficult to communicate with her mother ever since her parents divorced.
No, it started long before that.
When Yū was neglected and spited at by the other girls, her parents were busy talking about divorce, not realizing she was talking less at home, and not realizing her frustrations to a point where she could not eat.
When waking up in the morning, she knew she had to go to school, but was so terrified that she would break out in cold sweat.
Perhaps the indoor shoes would disappear from the shoe locker again.
Perhaps there would be graffiti all over her table.
Perhaps someone would curse her, "You're just a lowly commoner, and you dare to brazenly approach a noble!", "You look very obedient for a vixen", "You're really the best at seducing others".
Whenever she raised her umbrella, she could hide her cheeks, red with shame, and her teary eyes. In there, she could at least gain some solace.
The bright blue umbrella with an angelfish printed on it was a birthday gift she received on her first year of middle school. After going out to eat with her parents, they went past a department store on the way back.
"That umbrella is pretty!"
She ran over to the store, her eyes dazzling.
And then, she carried the umbrella, wrapped with a golden ribbon, with utmost care as she returned.
That day, both parents were smiling brightly at Yū.
It was a really, really important umbrella to Yū.
An umbrella that would always protect Yū.

An umbrella that would always shelter her from the stares filled with malice.
A magic umbrella that could help her reminisce the wonderful moment.
But the umbrella disappeared.
That umbrella was the only thing barely supporting her heart.
The black, large fish had opened its mouth and devoured the angelfish full.
The spiteful voices rang in her mind, shrilling echoing.

—I heard your umbrella disappeared?

—Too bad then, but I guess it couldn't be helped.

—If you walk on with your uniform completely drenched, maybe an old man looking to hook up with a girl will call out for you?

The laughter continued to echo in her ears over and over again.
She again recalled the despair she felt at the school gate, when the heavy downpour nearly pierced through her skin, and her body tensed up, aching.
"You're too strong… there's no way you can understand…"
He did not know how terrifying it was for her to walk out of this cramped room, and did not know how painful it was for her to obey her mother's command.
Like how a fish could only live in water, Yū could not breathe whenever she stepped outside the door. No matter how many unfriendly stares and words he faced, Koremitsu had the courage to fight back; that was why he could not understand.
Like his mother, Koremitsu felt her life was abnormal.
If he met her, he'll definitely call her to go to school.
Yū's wish did not meet Koremitsu's hope.
"I'll get your umbrella back for you," Koremitsu had said.
But how could that be possible?
She did not believe Koremitsu, and did not believe his fantasy.
At this point, even if she met Koremitsu, she would simply feel depressed, not knowing what to say next, and not knowing how to face him. She could no longer fall asleep in front of Koremitsu's sights.
(Hikaru is not like Akagi… he won't say such cruel things to me…)
He would not ask why she did not attend school, would not say it was an abnormal thing, or that she was peculiar, and would not tell her she should not continue on like this—

—You're like a Gourd flower, Yū.

He gently narrowed his eyes, telling Yū what kind of flower she was.

—It is a fragile flower that cannot bloom under the sunlight, and that

makes it all the more delicate, adorable… and pretty. The white petals that bloom under the darkness make it pure and gentle. When looking at it, you will feel that you are in a dream, able to gain that moment of peace.

Hikaru's sweet gentle voice slowly wrapped around Yū's heart.

—Hikaru, do you like Gourd flowers?

—Yes, I really do. I can continue to look at them for an entire night.

It will be best if you remain as who you are, Yū, and continue as a flower that blooms in the night.

That sort of flower had its own value. Those were gentle, moving words—words she would never ever forget.
He continued to describe the names and shapes of the beautiful flowers he spotted in the park or on the roadside, as Yū could not take a single step out from her apartment.

—Hikaru… are you, happy…?

He was too gentle, and had no request of her as he simply smiled. Thus, she could not resist the urge, and asked worriedly. With clear eyes,

—I am.

He answered.
His tone was very calm, and did not carry any sense of pretense.

—Then what about you? Are you happy?

And thus, Yū too showed a sincere smile, "I'm happy" and answered.

—As long as I stay here, I feel happy. Nobody will say anything cruel to me here… I don't need to be scared, I don't need to go around hiding… and I can go anywhere whenever I close my eyes… I can see all sorts of beautiful things…

She rubbed her cheeks on the blanket as she closed her eyes.
It was soft, gentle… a relieving touch. She really wanted to stay there forever.
Hikaru too answered her softly.

—Yeah, this place has everything… this is the most comfortable place in the entire world.

They both closed their eyes and let time pass as they listened to the gentle waves only they could hear.
But Koremitsu definitely could not hear the waves. He definitely could not see the scenery both Yū and Hikaru saw.
Only Hikaru could understand her. That was why she only needed Hikaru and Lapis' company.
On this day, Lapis was seated at the window side, looking outside the window through the seam of the curtain.
It was the position Lapis took most of the time.
It had been almost a year since Lapis first came in. Its hearing sense was bad, and it was a cautious, slow kitten with a habit of staring at things.
Yū would occasionally recall what happened at school, and whenever she shuddered in fear, her heart would calm down whenever she stared at Lapis' wise lapis-colored eyes that were looking back at her.
Lapis was always sitting beside Yū as the latter cried in despair, whether it was on the day her father called, telling her he could not protect her living needs, on the day her mother came to the apartment to look for her for the one and only time, "If you like to wait here, just starve to death!" and lambasted her, on the day she received news of Hikaru's death through the phone.
But once she calmed down, Lapis would walk away on its own and sit at the window side.
And continue to look outside.
Lapis was a cat who liked its freedom, and perhaps it really wanted to get out. Like Hikaru, it might leave Yū one day.
(And I'll be alone.)
Yū suddenly felt a sharp pain in her heart, and her hands, grabbing onto the blanket, started to shudder.
The golf bag her father once used, the electric fan and stove her mother treasured; at this point, those were trash they had discarded.
And Yū was abandoned by them.
So Lapis would… and Koremitsu would…
(No! It's scary! I don't want to think about it again!)

"Try taking a step forward, perhaps you may understand."

Understand? What would she understand?
The oxymoronic feeling of fearing a meeting with Koremitsu, and yet hoping he would send a message?
Yū slowly turned her head to where Hikaru often waited at, and spoke with a faltering tone,

“Hikaru… if you’re here… you should be able to tell me, right?”
Hikaru had once gently told Yū, “Because you never loved me”.
He was staring at her with a sad clear expression, and said she would one day understand the delight of love.
At that time, Hikaru was bitterly clinging on to love.
No, he must have been bitterly clinging to love even until his death.
He continued to pamper her with pure, unadulterated love and tenderness, without hoping for anything in return, cared for her, comforted her, and at the same time, truly loved the one person he could not embrace.
Whenever he thought of that person, the sidelong profile of his clear face would darken with much loneliness—the dreamy eyes showed much pain and suffering, but continued to endure…
A few times she woke up from her shallow sleep, and saw Hikaru put his forehead on his tightly clasped hands, his eyes closed. Then, he would open his eyes, and show a light smile in a forsaken manner.
That smile made him look all the more in pain than when he closed his eyes hard… and more the lonelier.
Why did Hikaru want to have that painful love? Why did he not give up?
Yū tentatively looked over at the place covered by the curtain—where Lapis always looked at, and muttered blankly.

“Love… what is it?”

And at that moment, the cellphone on the table vibrated.
“!”
She shuddered in shock, and was practically unable to breathe when she checked the message.
Once she discovered it was a message sent from Koremitsu, her heart, which had skipped a beat, started beating intensely again.
The stiff finger opened the content of the message.
Yū widened her eyes in shock.
There was a short line on the screen.

“I’ll chase that vengeful spirit away tomorrow.”

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It had been raining since morning on the third day of the midterms, and it was really cold.
The Heian Academy High School students who were carrying umbrellas as they headed to school found a mysterious line of words at the corridor near the shoe lock, and were all terrified.

“The vengeful spirit has cometh.”

There was a horizontal line of thick black words, written in brushstrokes,

on the white wall, and the strokes tailing downwards and sideways could not hide the force used to write it. The ink sprayed everywhere was like scattered blood, life-like to a point where it could jump out from the wall.
The students were thoroughly shocked as they saw that line of words, and their hearts were apparently gripped by a black hand as they stood still, shuddering in fear.
It was not too long ago that the chain mail regarding Yū Kanai was circulated all around, so everyone immediately associated the school's vengeful spirit with the words in front of them.
It was the same that time, when the umbrella was hung up, dripping with terrifying black water, dirtying the windows and wall.
The vengeful spirit from the past was ready to strike again.
This was an omen.
It was a school with lots of traditions, filled with children descended from families lasting since ancient times.
In this unique sealed spaces where unscientific superstitions like divinations and curses were highly believed in, the power of this vengeful spirit would be fulfilled to the fullest.
The fear budding in the students increased the existence of this vengeful spirit, and scattered into every single corner of the school.
"The vengeful spirit has appeared!"
"What will happen this time?"
"Someone's going to be eaten up again!"
Some of the girls were broken to the point of tears, and there was a massive commotion on the corridor.
Koremitsu kept his mouth sharp as he stared at this scene sharply.
He continued to stare at the terrified response from every single person, like a wild dog hunting its prey, and after a while, walked away from this commotion with his back slouched.
And so, Asai Saiga stood in front of him with a stern look.
"You really like to create commotions here, Mr Akagi."
Her voice was filled with anger.
"What do you mean?"
"You wrote those words, did you not?"
"Who knows? Didn't that vengeful spirit write it?"
Asai's face immediately cringed, and she showed an icy glint in her eyes.
"I will know just by investigating into it a little, but even if I do not, I know that this tomfoolery is done by none other than you."
"Is that a compliment?"
Upon seeing how Koremitsu intended to play dumb till the end, Asai raised an eyebrow.
"I did not expect you to be a beast lacking such common sense. What do you intend to do next?"
Koremitsu glared defiantly at Asai, his expression vicious to a point where she was momentarily at a loss of words.

“If you want to know what happens next, just watch quietly.”

In the meantime, Honoka was hiding behind a corner on the corridor, her breath abated as she watched Koremitsu depart and Asai, who was glaring at him.
(Did Akagi write those words?)
Koremitsu’s grandfather managed a calligraphy class, so Koremitsu must be well-skilled in writing brushstroke words. Honoka too once saw the words he wrote, and they were neat and pretty.
(But why must Akagi create such a large commotion?)

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“Once the exams are over, come to the chemistry laboratory.”
Upon seeing the content of the letters slipped secretly into the shoe locker, the girl turned deathly pale.
It has arrived!
The fearful silence had continued on since a month ago.
Whenever she walked on the corridor, whenever she chatted with her friends in the classroom, she would feel a sharp stare, and would inadvertently turn behind to look.
She could not see that person, but that sharp stare continued to linger in her heart, and that cold voice was something she could not shake off in the end. Her back felt cold, and the blood was drained off her face.
Whenever she thought about this before their sleep, she would shake their heads hard in fear, and cringe her body.
Every day, she would be practically jittery.
When would it be over?
No, when would it ‘begin’?
Being observed for a long time brought her at the brink of collapse—but recently, it had finally started to improve for the better.
But at this point, the day of judgement had arrived.
Signed off at the end of the messages were the words,

“From the vengeful spirit.”

The girl averted the stares beside her and secretly hid the messages into the pocket of her uniform before proceeding down the chilly corridor.
It continued to drizzle outside the window, and it caused her gut to wince further in fear.
Right, it was raining that day—
The frozen fingers opened the door leading to the chemistry laboratory.
Five umbrellas were opened in a line, hanging off the window grids.
The black liquid dripped down from the tip of the umbrellas, and the smell of ink reached her nose, followed by the sound of screams,
“IT’S THE VENGEFUL SPIRIT!”
“THIS IS REVENGE!”

The screams continued to linger in their ears, as if a large black typhoon swirled and devoured them whole as they were unable to resist in any way. Some of them stared blankly at the black droplets dripping from the umbrella, something that should not be happening.
“…Kawai.”
Upon hearing someone call for her, the girl turned around in shock.
Once she opened the door, she closed her eyes in fear.
Once she opened them, she saw the window drenched completely in rainwater, the ivory-coloured curtains that were collapsed to the side, and the pale faces of four people.
“You… received the letter too?”
“…yes.”
“So, *all of us* are here.”
“…that’s… right.”
Silence descended upon the scene.
Every single person lowered their heads, ostensibly not wanting to look at each other. The sound of rain and the damp rotten smell of grass and leaves roamed in the classroom.
Finally, someone became impatient with the heavy atmosphere, and spoke up,
“…who wrote those words on the wall…”
Another person said with a shuddering voice,
“The one who wrote to us… is probably the same as the one who wrote those words, right?”
Another person said,
“I thought…this was already over.”
And then, they started to talk frantically,
“What do we do? Is Upperclassman Tōjō still mad at us?”
“Must be. He’s definitely furious. His tone was calm back then, but his expression was really scary. He must be the same one this time.”
“This has nothing to do with me! I wasn’t the one who stole Kanai’s umbrella!”
“Me neither!”
“Really? You’re the one who really loves to bully Kanai most.”
“Don’t kid around, Abe. You’re the one who went overboard, I only joined in later. You hid Kanai’s umbrella, right? That’s why things ended up like this…
“You want to push the responsibility onto me? Wasn’t Marika the one who suggested ostracizing Kanai and hiding her umbrella?”
“That’s not it. Kawai’s the one who suggested it first. I was simply following her. The umbrella has nothing to do with me.”
“No, the one who hid it was Marika. You were the one who spread the photo that Upperclassman Tōjō was sharing an umbrella with Kanai, and even said that we definitely mustn’t forgive her.”

“That’s what Abe said, right!? Abe said Kanai went overboard, and that we must teach her a good lesson.”
“I don’t know anything about that umbrella—before Upperclassman Tōjō scolded us, I…”
“I CAN’T TAKE THIS ANYMORE!!!”
Someone finally broke down, crying.
“I DON’T WANT TO BE OSTRACIZED BY EVERYONE AND STARED AT WITH COLD EYES AGAIN! WE WERE COMPLETELY TREATED AS BAD GUYS THAT TIME!”
“I HAD TO QUIT THE TEA CEREMONY CLUB BECAUSE OF THAT INCIDENT AS WELL!”
“And then we got lectured by Upperclassman Tōjō…”
“That’s because Kawai did something she shouldn’t have done!”
“DIDN’T YOU ALL AGREE TO JOIN IN TOO!”
“AND WE WERE ALL TREATED AS THE BAD GIRLS. UPPERCLASSMAN TŌJŌ EVEN SAID “YOUR HEARTS ARE SO BLACK THEY CAN’T BE HIDDEN. I DON’T WANT TO SEE SUCH WRETCHED STUDENTS IN OUR SCHOOL”!”
“Upperclassman Tōjō is obviously still fuming over it.”
“WHAT EXACTLY DID WE DO WRONG!? THIS WOULDN'T HAVE HAPPENED IF KANAI NEVER TRIED TO HOOK UP WITH UPPERCLASSMAN TŌJŌ!”
“THAT’S RIGHT! KANAI’S JUST A COMMONER WHO JOINED SINCE MIDDLE SCHOOL, AND SHE DARED TO ENTICE HIM!”
“IT’S ALL KANAI’S FAULT! SHE NOT ONLY SEDUCED UPPERCLASSMAN TŌJŌ, BUT ALSO LORD HIKARU… LORD HIKARU MUST HAVE BEEN KILLED BECAUSE HE WAS WITH HER! THAT’S WHAT ALL THE CHAIN MESSAGES SAID!”
“NO DOUBT ABOUT IT! KANAI’S DEFINITELY POSSESSED BY A VENGEFUL SPIRIT!”

“You girls really are all black-hearted."

Koremitsu crawled out from under the table as he said furiously.
The girls, who were bickering furiously just a moment ago, screamed “HIIIII!!!” as they remained rooted.
With his back slouched, Koremitsu’s eyes were burning with anger, and he walked past the black heatproof tables as the footsteps echoed.
“Even till now, you continue to push responsibilities around, and you think you have no blame at all? If I squeeze your hearts out, there’ll definitely be black water flowing out like ink.”
You wanna try this? He raised his eyebrows as he said this, and looked at them, one by one.
Those girls were utterly terrified as their face immediately cringed, and they shuddered all over.

(There’s no point in getting angry with them at all.)
Upon thinking about this, Koremitsu bared his teeth and raised the edges of his lips
“!”
The girls widened their eyes, and took a few steps back.
“Don’t you ever dare badmouth Yū Kanai again, and don’t you dare bully her, or you won’t even have to wait for the vengeful spirit to take action. I’ll rip those impure mouths of yours out first!”
Koremitsu continued to keep his lips curled up as he said with a vicious stare.
He wanted to smile, but those girls,
“NOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”
Screamed in terror as they dashed to the door, their faces riddled with tears as they intended to escape, and crashed into each other in the end. They were unable to move, and were screeching in fear, yelling, collapsed on the corridor in a bunch like an avalanche, and without caring that their skirts were flipped and their hair were a mess. They scampered away with no regards for their lives.
Every single one of them fell twice, thrice before they completely calmed down.
Well, who cares about them anyway?
Koremitsu was more concerned by the fact that those girls screamed “HE’S SCARIER THAN A VENGEFUL SPIRIT!” when they were escaping, and that was something he could not comprehend.
Was that not too much of an exaggeration?
He was feeling depressed within, and beside him, a voice rang,
“I am starting to pity those girls a little.”
Hikaru showed a wry smile.
“Your smile is way too potent. Remember, never ever use it in a love scene.”
“No need for any unnecessary remarks.”
Koremitsu answered unhappily.
Besides, was there any reason to pity them? He really liked to pamper girls.
“I just can’t smile anyway, and I’m still angry at you. Don’t you randomly talk with me.”
Hikaru shrugged and smiled slightly.
“But… after seeing how those black-hearted girls continued to push blame around, there’re some things I don’t understand, like Tōjō’s case.”
Koremitsu folded his arms as he tilted his head in doubt. Hikaru seemed to have understood everything as he showed a wise expression, saying,
“Then, I suppose we should look for Mr Shungo.”

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Luckily, Tōjō had yet to leave school.
"He should be there."

With Hikaru leading the way, Koremitsu arrived at a bamboo garden in a corner of the school. There were short shrubs growing at their feet, and the bamboo and plants bristled whilst the breeze blew.
After walking for a while, they could find a stone monument surrounded by rocks covered with algae, and Tōjō was standing beside it, holding a dark green umbrella.
He was standing still, and his eyes were closed as he was apparently meditating.
Koremitsu, holding a navy blue umbrella, approached Tōjō, and the latter must have heard the sound of train pelting on another umbrella as he opened his eyes, before giving Koremitsu a sharp unwelcoming look
Koremitsu too glared back, saying,
"I have something to talk to you about."
"I however have nothing to talk with you about."
The baritone rang clearly.
Tōjō was about to turn away and leave, but Koremitsu called out to him with a loud, clear voice,
"Just listen to me first I'm going to talk about the real identity of the vengeful spirit."
The dark green umbrella stopped.
"I summoned the girls who tormented Yū and questioned them already."
"They said so already?"
There was some doubtful undertone in the voice coming from behind the umbrella.
"Yeah. They sure talked quite a lot."
Koremitsu pretended to remain calm as he answered coldly, silently observing Hikaru's reaction.
Hikaru was floating silently between Koremitsu and Tōjō, observing the standoff between both parties.
At this point, Koremitsu still did not understand what Hikaru was thinking, and did not understand the intent behind ‘those words’ he talked about the previous day.
(I don’t care anyway. I just want to help Yū as much as I can.)
There was no time to think about it; if he kept staring at Hikaru, Tōjō would be suspicious. He definitely could not show any form of hesitation or openings in front of the latter.
Right, the important thing was the guy in front of him, shrouded in arrogance befitting that of a noble.
For he could possibly be the mastermind behind the commotion of the vengeful spirit a year ago, causing Yū to be terrified of going to school.
Koremitsu tried his best to look away from Hikaru, and glared at the sturdy back under the dark green umbrella.
“They all said the same thing. To paraphrase them, I wasn’t the one who stole the umbrella.”
You hid the umbrella, didn’t you?

I didn't. Wasn't it you?
All the girls said they were not the ones who took the umbrella, and started pushing blame amongst each other. From their words, Koremitsu could not detect a trace of remorse in their words.
"Maybe they really didn't steal Yū's umbrella, but was treated by everyone as the culprits, and because they were frowned upon by their classmates, they panicked."

—I DON'T WANT TO BE OSTRACIZED BY EVERYONE AND STARED AT WITH COLD EYES AGAIN! WE WERE COMPLETELY TREATED AS BAD GUYS THAT TIME!

—I HAD TO QUIT THE TEA CEREMONY CLUB BECAUSE OF THAT INCIDENT AS WELL!

The girls were screaming hysterically, at the top of their lungs, insisting they were innocent.
"Of course, they deserved it, since they were definitely bullying Yū. They saw that she was frustrated over the loss of her umbrella, and continued to mock her spitefully. However, they never thought about reflecting on their actions, and simply thought about how to change their unfortunate situation where 'they were blamed because they never did anything bad'. They felt they're the victims, thinking about how to protect themselves—that's why they decided to 'make themselves as victims that can capture the attention of others more'."
The bamboos shook harder, releasing a rustling sound.
Tōjō looked around and frowned.
The rain fell from the sky like arrows.
The uppity expression under the dark green umbrella still did not show any weakness.
But he did not turn and walk away, but stood where he was, listening attentively to Koremitsu.
"The next day after Yū lost her umbrella, their umbrellas disappeared, and were found hanging on the window grill in the chemistry classroom. That was something they scripted and enacted themselves, to gain some sympathy, to remove themselves from suspicions."
The wind made a mess of Koremitsu's red hair.
Tōjō's black hair swayed as well.
However…
"So what? Does it have anything to do with me?"
It seemed he had no intention of bothering with it as he asked coldly.
Koremitsu's temper immediately flared.
As expected, he's not some minor character who would reveal any openings. Fine, I'll rip off that arrogant mask of a noble you have!

Koremitsu’s eyes were blazing with rage, and he concluded in a taunting manner,
“Of course it does. That’s what I think.”
Show me some panic, Tōjō.
Let me see your face contort, your voice shudder. The way you look lost.
“Because they’re obviously not scared of the vengeful spirit, but you, Tōjō! They never said anything about the vengeful spirit at all, and they merely parroted the words ‘Upperclassman Tōjō got angry’ over and over again.”
He showed the smile both Hikaru and the girls were highly disparaging of. It was a horrifying smile that was definitely not something that could be used in a love scene where tenderness was required, but something very suitable for a duel.
He bared his teeth and raised the edges of his lips. His eyes were dazzling as he grinned.
For the first time, Tōjō looked shocked as he widened his eyes and cringed back.
“You said something to them.”
Koremitsu’s face had a terrifying face as he uttered out the words those girls said with pale faces.
“Your hearts are so black they can’t be hidden. I don’t want to see such wretched students in our school.”
Tōjō’s face darkened as he narrowed his eyes. Koremitsu continued to attack relentlessly.
“It’s true that they dangled their umbrellas, but you’re the one who poured the ink on the umbrellas! The reason why they did all of these was all because of you, Shungo Tōjō!”
A vengeful spirit originates from the malice in a person’s heart.
However, the vengeful spirit that gained sentience was being manipulated by this person!
The black water dripping down the tips of the umbrella was the message he gave those girls.
Secretly implying the black hearts they could not hide.
He used such a method to threaten those shallow girls, and achieved some objective as a result.
In the midst of this bamboo forest, Koremitsu stared at the upperclassman with an uppity expression, dishevelled hair, and a contorted handsome face, roaring,
“WHAT EXACTLY WAS YOUR OBJECTIVE!?”
At this moment, a voice came from behind.
“It’s revenge. He wants revenge on Yū Kanai.”

Chapter 7 - The Girl Sharing an Umbrella

Upon looking back, Koremitsu found Hiina Oumi and Asai Saiga standing there, sharing an umbrella for some reason.
With an unwilling look on her face, Asai was holding a dark red umbrella resembling a large flower, whilst Hiina, standing beside her, was holding a closed mint green umbrella, her expression lively to an astounding level.
(Was it Hiina who said Tōjō wanted revenge?)
“I just so happened to meet President Saiga over here, so I came here to eavesdrop.”
She said unabashedly as her thick lips were brimming with a smile.
However, Asai showed more distaste as compared to before.
“I am standing here as the Student Council President, having decided I have the right to know the situation. Do not associate me with you.”
She said harshly.
“Oh my, don’t be so harsh with your words. Are we not eavesdropping partners sharing the same umbrella now?”
“You are the one who snuck under my umbrella.”
“It’ll be too obvious if both of us share the same umbrella. Of course I have to know how to respond to the situation here.”
“Is that so? Our cover has been exposed; you may proceed out now.”
“Are you not too cold, President?’
Koremitsu interrupted their never-ending conversation,
“Hey, Oumi, what did you mean when you said that?”
Like a fearless youth, Hiina stared at Koremitsu and everyone else present with a lively expression.
Then, she opened her umbrella.
“It’s nothing at all. I am just telling the truth.”
She raised the umbrella over her head and approached them as she talked, ostensibly testing the reactions from all the parties present.
“Heh, Upperclassman Tōjō.”
Hiina walked to Tōjō, looked up to him, and again showed a fearless smile as she rattled on,
"Were you vexed by the fact that Yū Kanai would not obey you? The reason why those girls, who had been tormenting Miss Kanai, probably hung their umbrellas because you did something to prompt them, and made everyone

think that Miss Kanai was afflicted with a vengeful spirit, preventing her from attending school as a result. You must have felt she was a hindrance, right? For a mere peasant, who entered this school only in middle school, dared to dump you, and still be in the same school as you?"
Koremitsu felt his body heat rise as his glare got sharper.
(Is this the reason?)
Did he want to chase Yū away because of this reason?
Was this the aim of the vengeful spirit?
No, Hiina Oumi was just using this as a feint to incite, to confuse, and to lead Tōjō into telling the truth. It need not necessarily be true.
(Don't be fooled by this. Got to look into this clearer.)
Tōjō frowned hard as he heard these words, but once Hiina stopped talking and looked back with an expectant look, hoping for a response…
"…Yū Kanai was never someone I fell in love with."
Just like how he conversed with Koremitsu, he answered with that stiff, business-like tone.
Asai watched over this with her long narrow knowledgeable-looking eyes, apparently wondering what the truth was truly all about.
Koremitsu.
Tōjō.
Asai.
All of them were looking tense, and Hiina was the only one grinning happily as she casually made a shocking comment.
"That's how it is. How can Upperclassman Tōjō, whose ego is higher than that of an ordinary person, endure the pain of being rejected by a dispensable woman. More unfortunately, after Miss Kanai started locking herself in her house and started living alone, Lord Hikaru even visited her apartment. You must have been all the more furious with that, right? Lord Hikaru was the young lord to the Mikado family, whom the Tōjō family served. As long as the situation does not change, your standing will basically be that of an eunuch assisting the prince Lord Hikaru. The Tōjō family is truly a prestigious one, but it is not at the highest order. You must have felt very incensed that someone, whose hierarchy was something you can never succeed against, who took the stares of admiration from half the female student population, was in the same school as you? In fact, even in terms of popularity, Lord Hikaru vastly exceeds you. Ah, I'm sorry. You probably do not care about who those girls fawn over Upperclassman Tōjō, but you do view Lord Hikaru as a rival. You must have been enraged that the girl who refused you actually accepted Lord Hikaru, for this means that Lord Hikaru has more masculine charm than you. ***Thus, your hate was not simply directed at Yū Kanai, but also Lord Hikaru***."
Upon hearing this, Asai shuddered.
Koremitsu too gasped in surprise.
(What is Hiina trying to get at here…?)
Tōjō however remained unfazed.

Hiina's shirt was soaked by the rain that splattered her sidelong, and the lines of her underwear were revealed, but she was unabashed as she raised her busty chest higher, continuing delightfully,
"I heard something when I was cleaning the toilet out of interest. Upperclassman Tōjō, you went to a resort in Shinshu during Golden Week this year. Oh my, it seems Lord Hikaru was in a resort at Shinshu that time too, right? Well, it doesn't matter, since it's a vacation hotspot for political and financial powers. It certainly is normal if the Mikados' resort is located near the Tōjōs'. There are few things you can do over there, so it must have been easy meeting someone you do not want to meet, I suppose? Thus, you two really met at the horse turf in the forest. I suppose this is a prank caused by God, huh? You had a quarrel with Lord Hikaru, whom you deeply resented, probably because he looked so dazzling riding on the horse. I heard you yelled at him, and grabbed him by the collar on horseback. This really isn't something the refined and courteous Upperclassman Tōjō would normally do."
Koremitsu tried his best, telling himself not to be shaken by the facts Hiina revealed, but he still felt confused deep within, his throat heated.
She said Tōjō once met Hikaru at the holiday resort?
And had a quarrel with Hikaru?
(I never heard of it!)
It seemed Hikaru's cousin Asai had already known about this, and her poker face remained unmoved as she continued to stare at Tōjō intently, seemingly watching the latter's reaction.
Tōjō stared at Hiina silently.
His handsome face was contorted slightly, but his back was still straight, and his expression remained cold and aloof.
(What is this guy thinking anyway?)
Tōjō's remained as stoic as ever, causing Koremitsu to inadvertently feel anxious, and a little mystified.
(Is he hiding something?)
Hiina seemed to be teasing Tōjō as she raised her pitch.
"That evening, you visited Lord Hikaru's villa."
Koremitsu's heart immediately jumped.
Asai's eyes showed a sharp glint.
"And then, what did you say to Lord Hikaru? Did that conversation cause you to increase your hatred for him?"
Tōjō did not answer.
He merely kept his lips sealed.
Hiina then continued,
"Did you kill Lord Hikaru out of your hatred of him, that Yū Kanai was taken away?"
The strong winds blew, and the bamboos let out a rustle as they tilted.
The raindrops slid off the bamboo leaves, and fell upon Koremitsu's face.
Hiina showed a boyish energetic smile,

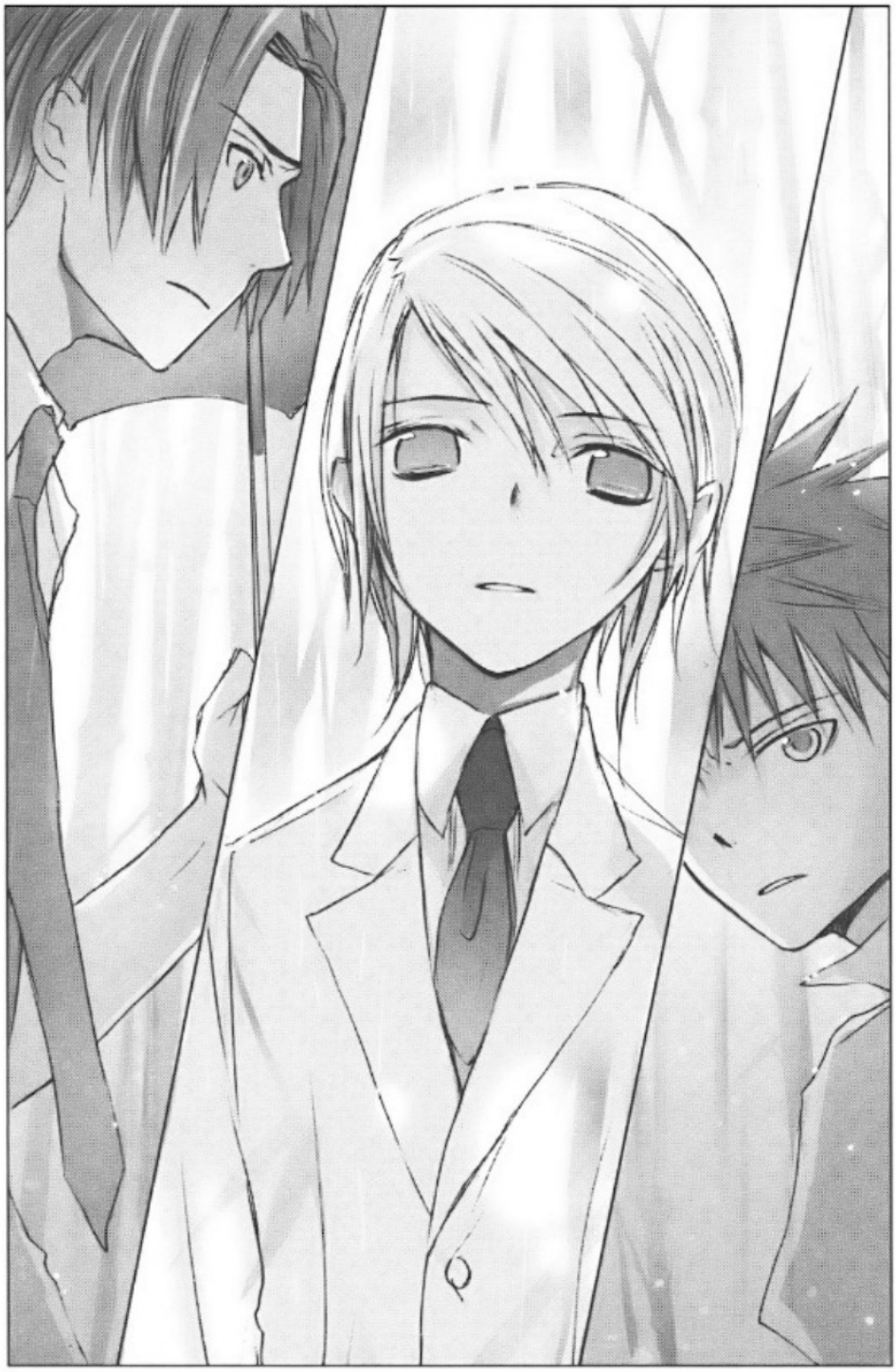
Tōjō stared at Hiina with a condescending look, and just when he was about to open his tightly sealed lips…

"That is correct. Mr Shungo was really agitated, to a point where I felt he wanted to strangle me."

Koremitsu heard this gentle, delightful voice.
Tōjō could not have heard this voice, but he kept his mouth sealed.
Hikaru's voice continued to echo in this bamboo forest as the rain descended.

"He yelled at me, saying 'The only thing you know is how to befuddle a person's heart. It would have been great if you were not around'."

At this point, like a beautiful flower, Hikaru stood silently between Koremitsu and Tōjō.



And at this moment, he finally did something.
Koremitsu stared at Hikaru in surprise.
This neat, delicate-looking youth was in the midst of a torrent, and yet was neither drenched nor stained.
The strong gales that brushed through the bamboos became a gentle breeze in front of his elegant face, and gently blew by that light brown hair.
Neither Tōjō, Hiina nor Asai could see him.
But Koremitsu could.
And only he could hear this sweet voice nobody else could hear.
Hikaru's voice, Hikaru's words.

"Mr Shungo said those words not because of malice or envy."

Why did he suddenly interrupt?
Hikaru's deep-looking eyes turned towards Tōjō without hesitation.
Tōjō could not see those eyes, and could not hear that voice.
Of the ones present, Koremitsu was the only one able to see, hear, and pass on Hikaru's message. Did Hikaru decide to speak up because he timed this situation perfectly?
(Argh, he's asking me to pass the message again?)
I'm all confused now because you said this so suddenly! At least tell me of this beforehand! Koremitsu was overwhelmed by Hikaru's serious tone before he could complain, and exclaimed,

"Tōjō did not kill Hikaru!"

Tōjō showed an obvious, startled expression.
He widened his mouth slightly, and widened his eyes as he stared at Koremitsu.

"He was truly angry enough to kill, and even told Hikaru ‘It would have been great if you were not around’. But that was not out of malice or envy."

Why the heck am I speaking up for Tōjō?
Asai and Hiina looked surprised as they stared at him.
Koremitsu was furious, his veins bulging as he tried his best to listen to Hikaru's voice. The latter however did not give Koremitsu a look, but stared at Tōjō with a reasonable look, and his girlish, graceful lips continued to let out these words,

"Mr Shungo wanted to protect Yū. He wanted to save her."

The clear voice had a tinge of sadness in it, coupled with a feeling of compassion that suppressed it. There was a cloud of haze fogging his eyes.

"Tōjō—actually wanted to protect Yū, to save her. That's what you hoped to do."

Koremitsu passed on Hikaru's words as the latter's spokesperson, but he was more surprised than anyone else.
(Is that really the case? Tōjō? You did all that to protect Yū ? But you snobbishly said that girls who entered in middle school aren't those you like, and you even said you know what kind of girl you should date…)
Tōjō lost his breath. His lips shuddered as his eyes widened blankly. He never showed any reaction after Hiina said so many things, but he was clearly rattled by this person that he is not bothering to hide his expression.
At this point, it seemed that whatever Hikaru said was true.
This caused Koremitsu to feel all the more inexplicable.

"On that evening, Mr Shungo looked for me because he wanted to apologize to me for the insolence he caused at the turf during the day. Mr Shungo was always a courteous, edified and dignified person."

"That evening, you looked for Hikaru because you wanted to apologize to him about the unruliness you did at the turf that day, and you had reflected over your actions properly."

Tōjō frowned, apparently at a loss for words.
Koremitsu too felt troubled.
He was shaken, and he was heating up. That aloof and arrogant Shungo Tōjō, who would trample on others mercilessly, was practically a changed man.
Was it that he was not the culprit behind all this?
Hikaru's gentle voice continued,

"Mr Shungo must have felt I was a very frivolous person, for he saw I was dating so many girls at the same time. I was riding on a horse with a girl back then, and even kissed while we were riding. It was obvious he would be angry as a result."

"…well, it couldn't be helped. Anyone would have thought of punching that guy for making out so passionately outdoors in the middle of the day."

Once Koremitsu said those words, Tōjō's eyes widened.
Why was it that he could describe it to such detail? It was like Koremitsu witnessed it personally at the scene, and was able to eloquently describe something only Hikaru and Tōjō knew…
Of course, Tōjō would be confounded by this.
Even Hiina and Asai were staring at Koremitsu intriguingly.

"When Mr Shungo met me at the villa, he was only talking about Yū. He even lashed out at me saying, 'Is Yū Kanai merely just one of your playmates?' That was the first time I saw him being that agitated. Obviously, he was really concerned about her. He was worried when he saw her shut herself in, unwilling to come out, and even hired a woman to stay next door and protect her… whenever I looked for Yū, that big sister would pop her head out to look and prevent me from doing anything bad. Whenever we were too quiet inside the room, she would worry that we were doing something bad, whether it would be knocking on the wall to create noise, break the atmosphere by playing some ballads or folk songs, or even start shouting loudly. She was acting as a hostess, but it was very unnatural for her to be home both in the day and at night. It would be more suitable if she were acting as a shut-in designer or manga artist."

Hikaru's words were like a puzzle being rebuilt, gradually piecing together a complete image of the situation.
Upon hearing that, Koremitsu was amazed and full of admiration.
The glitzy woman next door, who would glare and lash out at him without warning, and even slam the wall, was doing those things for such a reason.
So Tōjō was really trying his best to protect Yū!
Koremitsu felt his chest tighten upon hearing this.

"You… were always thinking about Yū, to a point where you hired a woman to stay next door and protect her.

Koremitsu's voice was filled with pain, and Hikaru's voice and expression was full of bitterness,

"Mr Shungo had been secretly exerting his influence in school to prevent Yū from being expelled despite her not attending school for a year. I suppose it is most likely that Mr Shungo was the one who notified Yū of my funeral date after I died? The sender of the message was a series of unintelligible letters 'upvkpv', but if we swap them for the alphabet before them, it would become 'Toujou'—Tōjō."

The little cellphone screen showed the message informing her of Hikaru's death.
That message was sent from Tōjō to Yū.

"You were the one who told Yū the funeral date. If the alphabets of the name was changed to the ones before, it would become your name —'Toujou'."

The gale stopped, and the forest was left only with the weak drizzle sound.

Tōjō closed his eyes with a heavy heart, showing a weak expression very unfitting of him.
Hiina was staring at Tōjō, looking like she was about to break down for some reason.
Asai frowned, her expression condescending and yet sympathizing.

"In that case, it would be impossible for you to harm Yū."

Hikaru did not say this, but Koremitsu did, and this was his thought as sadness and pathos lingered in his heart.

"You are right, Koremitsu. Mr Shungo was in a tight position when Yū was bullied by those girls, and it was inconvenient for him to interfere, but he did warn them."

Koremitsu knew that too.
The girls said so in a terrified manner,

"Your hearts are so black they can’t be hidden. I don’t want to see such wretched students in our school."

Those words were not said after they hung their umbrellas, but before then —he said this to the girls when they were tormenting Yū, before Yū's umbrella got stolen.

—I don’t know anything about that umbrella at all! Before Upperclassman Tōjō scolded us, I…

Right, they did say this with a pale face.
"You even warned those girls not to bully Yū, thinking that this would cause them to quiet down somewhat. But they saw how shocked Yū was because the umbrella was stolen, and started to have the urge to continue bullying her. That time however, they paid the price. They were deemed by everyone in school as the culprits who stole her umbrella and were ostracized. They then decided to take their umbrellas away secretly and act as victims, and you found out about their sneaky act,Tōjō. Thus, once they left the chemistry classroom, you poured ink on the umbrellas, telling them that you knew everything. Once they saw the blackened umbrellas, they were utterly terrified when they realized that was your warning. That was practically you telling them, your hearts are this corrupted. To them, being the target of your wrath was much more terrifying than facing a vengeful spirit. They definitely felt it was better being dead after being glared by you every single day."
Koremitsu had left the letters in their shoe lockers.
"From the vengeful spirit."

Upon seeing this name, they were shuddering all over, thinking Tōjō was the one who wrote it.
The time to make up for their sins had arrived!
"Right now, I guess Yū won't be bullied by anyone else again, but that day, something even you did not expect happen. Someone saw Yū running at school, dirty all over, holding her umbrella! This caused the rumors to spread, saying that the black umbrellas were hung up as Yū's revenge, and that she was possessed by a vengeful spirit."
What was it about Yū's living spirit that was witnessed?
'That' was most likely…
In this hazy rain, where there was barely enough visibility, the truth that originally could not be seen was starting to reveal itself.
Hikaru stared at Koremitsu with an empty expression, causing the latter to recall the transparent yet hollow eyes of Yū, and recalled the words Hikaru told him the previous day. He suddenly felt gloomy in his heart.
However, Koremitsu did not say the truth behind this living spirit.
Tōjō too probably realized it.
But that would be a test that Yū would have to face in the future, and at this point, other truths had to be uncovered.
He too would have to tell them to Yū.

—You will lose her.

Hikaru's voice continued to echo in his ears.

—I know how to avoid this situation.

On the previous day, Hikaru was staring at Koremitsu with a gloomy expression, ostensibly revealing a tragic prophecy that was unavoidable.
And yet Koremitsu…
(You really know how to worry blindly…)
Raised his chin confidently as he shook off the worry in his heart.
And just like the choice he made back then, at that point, he only wished for one thing.
To save Yū.
To support her, prevent her heart from breaking down further, from corroding, he had to reveal the truth.
The crux would be the person in front of him.
Shungo Tōjō, who was forcefully holding the handle of the dark green umbrella, his face contorted bitterly and grimaced.
"Tōjō, you had been protecting Yū for a long time because you thought you had to take responsibility for Yū being seen as a vengeful spirit. Your actions were all for her sake."
Hikaru too must have felt Koremitsu's determination.
With a sad expression, Hikaru said,

"Mr Shungo told me furiously at the villa, 'Leave the other women and focus on dating Yū Kanai. If you can't do that, break up with her'. He then lowered his head and begged me, 'Please let go of her. Please let go of her so that she can leave the house. If you keep looking for her, she may never step outside the house, for she may feel this is happiness'."

Hikaru, who did not know how to cry, would always smile whenever he felt lonely or sad—
And at this point, Hikaru's lips showed a faint smile.
Koremitsu suddenly felt his heart tighten in agony.
"Do you think it doesn't matter anyway after seeing Yū lock herself in the house like this!?"
When Koremitsu questioned this, Hikaru merely answered quietly, "I am merely a ghost." Perhaps he too knew he was one of the reasons why Yū shut herself inside.

"...you even begged Hikaru to leave Yū, telling him it was for her sake."

Tōjō exerted more strength on the umbrella handle.
The rainwater pelted hard on the umbrella.
Hikaru said to Tōjō with a clear expression,

"I answered, 'I understand'."

"Hikaru answered that he promised."

"For it was really time for me to separate from others. Not just Yū, but also with the other girls… I went to the resort, having made my decision. That was why I promised Mr Shungo to let Yū return to the outside world."

The dark clouds blocking Koremitsu's eyes immediately dissipated, and he finally understood.
The 'promise' Hikaru made with was not Yū.
This agreement was something made between Hikaru and Tōjō!
The heat swirling within Koremitsu flushed towards the same direction.
There was no hesitation on his part, and he could say this decisively,

"There's no reason for Tōjō to kill Hikaru! Hikaru has promised to leave Yū, to liberate Yū!"

Tōjō continue to stare at Koremitsu, viewing the him as an equal in this case. He stood still as he remained silent for a moment.
"...let me tell you the story of a fool."
He muttered, seemingly talking to himself.

"...that person really loved this corner of the campus, and would come here whenever he wanted to be alone. Most of the students knew about this, so there would hardly be anyone who would come here. However, she... probably did not know, for she had no good friend who could tell her this. One day, at noon, she arrived here, sat on this rock, and started eating."
Tōjō stared at the rocks, surrounding the stone monument, with algae growing on them. His expression softened somewhat, and then became melancholic.
"She was alone, but looked very at peace, very satisfied… and then, that fool appeared. That fool did not want to scare her, and thus, merely stood at the side for a while, choosing not to make a sound, and returned to the classroom. The next day, she too was here, and once she saw him, trembled in fear. Even after hearing him say that she could continue to eat at that place, she remained hesitant, and after a moment of hesitance, said thanks with a tentative whisper, cringed back and continued eating shyly. The next day, she did not appear, and it would have been great if it ended… but a few days later, there was a sudden downpour, and he was hiding in a building to seek shelter from the rain. She was holding an umbrella, and just so happened to pass by. When she noticed him, she showed a hesitant look again. Neither of them knew each other, but she had a gentle nature, and could not pretend to ignore him. Thus, she tentatively raised the umbrella for him, and accompanied him to a place where he could hail for a taxi..."
Tōjō's tone was calm and insipid as he talked about Yū.
"He should have rejected her proposal back then. Even till this day, he really regretted walking under her umbrella.
Tōjō did not mention his feelings for Yū at all.
But the tone, filled with suppressed emotions, amplified them and expressed them clearly.
The bamboo garden, grass, the rocks covered with algae, the stone monument...
In the midst of this serene scenery, that girl, who stealthily crept into this space, was deeply attracted by him.
Her shocked expression and shy demeanour caused him to have great feelings for her.
Upon seeing that introverted girl summon the courage to share the same umbrella with him, he really could not refuse, for there was a sweet emotion involved.
I am very clear on exactly what kind of woman I should go out with.
Tōjō, who said those self-righteous words harshly, knew that if he fell in love with a woman of a different family prestige, the other party would be stacked with grievances.
At this point, Koremitsu understood the meaning behind those words.
The more Tōjō liked Yū, the more he did not dare to approach her,
But even so, he could not give up on her completely.
He even hid his family name, hid his identity, and protected her silently.

The stare Koremitsu felt in front of Yū's house must have been from Tōjō too.

—Mr Shungo was always a courteous, edified and dignified person.

Koremitsu stared at Shungo Tōjō as if he was meeting a man for a first time.
He stared at the upright body, the lips full of masculine vibe, the firm-willed eyes.
What did he feel when he, who could not love freely, saw Hikaru enter one love relationship after another as if he was viewing flowers?
One could only imagine how spiteful he was of the latter.
Koremitsu too really hated Hikaru, and felt he was a popular cad, a casanova, a young lord without any worries.
But was that not admiration?
Was it not because Tōjō found Hikaru dazzling, for the latter was able to do something he could not?
(If we have to say this, I might be the same as him…)
And they fell in love with the same girl.
"...sorry for punching you yesterday."
Koremitsu said awkwardly.
Hiina and Asai widened their eyes, but Tōjō showed a self-depreciating smile.

—I suppose it’s good that Mr Shungo got punched once.

Hikaru said this gently when Koremitsu was in front of the basin, feeling downhearted.

—As the heir of the Tōjō family, I suppose nobody in this school would dare to beat Mr Shungo up.

At this moment, Koremitsu recalled that when he raised his fist, Tōjō did not do anything to dodge.
Perhaps he took that punch willingly.
It was something unseen, undiscovered, unknown.
The fingertips, wrists, throat, heart that were frozen due to tension the previous day were gradually filled with a silent power.
Hikaru stared at Koremitsu quietly.
Hikaru's wish.
This was something that could be understood without words.
(Ohh, I finally get it now, Hikaru.)
The thing blazing deep within Koremitsu's heart immediately ignited, and the flame rose. Koremitsu yelled at Tōjō,

"AS A FRIEND OF HIKARU, I'LL FULFILL THAT PROMISE YOU MADE WITH HIM! I'LL DO WHAT YOU AND HIM AGREED ON!"
Hikaru narrowed his eyes, completely touched.
Hiina leaned her upper body forward in surprise, while Asai frowned and bit her lips.
With a serious look, Tōjō stared at Koremitsu.

"I shall leave it to you then."

He said quietly—and gave a deep bow.
Koremitsu too answered with a deep voice,

"Leave it to me."

He held onto the umbrella handle hard, turned away, and walked on the mud-troddened ground.
The raindrops continued to pelt upon the umbrella.
At this moment, he found Honoka standing at the back door of the school campus.
It seemed obvious she came here worried about Koremitsu.
"Aka…"
Before she could call out, she caught herself, probably because she saw the serious expression Koremitsu showed, revealing his steadfast attitude.
Koremitsu nodded slightly at Honoka, and walked out of the school gate.
Hikaru too followed silently, his expression as bleak and serious—and filled with decisiveness like Koremitsu's.
Both of them knew how great of an ordeal awaited them.

—You will lose her.

Those words kept ringing at Koremitsu's ears since the previous day, and Hikaru told him about how to avoid this.
On that night, as the cold rain descended upon the road, Hikaru told Koremitsu, who was looking aside stubbornly, how to avoid a tragic ending with a sincere attitude.
(Let's go, Hikaru, we're going to save Yū from the demonic clutches of the vengeful spirit.)
Koremitsu reached his hand into his pocket, and took out his cellphone.
After searching through the phone book, and upon finding Yū's number, he placed the cellphone at his ear with a glum expression.

Chapter 8 - That Was Really Love

(Akagi still hasn't sent me a message yet…)
Having checked her phone ever since the morning, Yū let her shoulders collapse under the blanket as she lowered her head dejectedly.

"I'll chase that vengeful spirit away tomorrow."

After sending this message the yesterday, Koremitsu had yet to contact her.
(Why… did Akagi send that message to me? What exactly is he trying to do?)
Shall she take the initiative to send a message to him?
No, she had already decided not to meet him again. Even if he knocked on the door, she could not let him in.
She could thus regain her peaceful life again.
And she would not have to feel bitter thinking about Koremitsu, and suddenly feel terrified or lost.
(But, what if… Akagi really finds my umbrella? What do I do?)
Such a thing could not happen.
Definitely not.
But if a blue umbrella with an angelfish swimming on it appeared in front of her eyes.
That umbrella—was the birthday gift Yū's parents gave her. If she could relive that blissful moment, and have it return to her hands…
Yū's heart was trepidating with excitement, but once she realized it was impossible no matter what, her heart was shrouded in the darkness of despair.
The rain that rang outside the window was ostensibly abusing her, causing her to hurt all over, as if she was stabbed everywhere by harpoons.
(That's enough, I can't take it anymore. I don't want to see anything, I don't want to hear anything.)
She did not want to hurt others, let alone herself.
She just thought about seeing such blissful events, and living a peaceful life in a place nobody else would notice.
(When will the rain stop?)
She tugged harder at the blanket draped all over her from head to toe, and was crouched in a corner of the room shivering.

At that moment, Lapis continued to sit at the window side, its bright Lapis-colored eyes looking outside through the gap of the window curtains.
(You want to go outside, Lapis?)
The white tail swayed slightly.
Yū held onto the cellphone tightly with both hands, and spoke with a weak voice,
"Don't… leave me, Lapis."
Tears swelled helplessly as her throat was afflicted with a piercing pain.
The icy droplet rolled down her cheeks, and at this moment, Lapis slowly approached Yū rubbing its body at the blanket.
"Thank you, Lapis… for being so understanding. You'll accompany me forever, right…?"
Lapis' eyes looked up at Yū.

—Lapis' eye color resemble that of Earth.

Those were eyes Hikaru once praised softly.
Yū really hoped to remain in that little world forever. She really hoped she could close her eyes, have a wonderful dream, and melt within that blue sea.
The phone in her hand suddenly rang.
"—!"
Startled, she stared at the screen.
It was from Koremitsu.
Not a message, but a phone call.
(What do I do now? I'm scared!)
Why did he not send a mail? Her heart would definitely falter upon hearing his voice.
The phone continued to vibrate.
Yū held her breath, pressed the call button, and slowly brought the phone to her ears.

"Yū, are you listening there? Yū?"

Koremitsu's voice rang through the thin and light cellphone clearly.
Her heart throbbed, and tears were almost welling from her eyes again.
A sobbing voice came from her mouth.
Koremitsu probably heard it, and he let out a heavy sigh on the other end.
Both parties have confirmed each other's existence, and after a while.
Koremitsu started talking,
With his usual, calm and deep voice.
"I just… chased the vengeful spirit away. It's not a spirit, but just some ordinary ghosts, and also an upright yet foolish person… they're all alive."

Koremitsu tried his best to find terms as he stiffly described the incident with the girls that bullied Yū, what Tōjō did after knowing it, and how much he did for Yū up till this point.
Yū already knew Shungo Tōjō was the one who notified her of Hikaru's death.
When she sat at the stone monument behind the school campus, eating her meal alone, she spotted a tall bulky proud-looking upperclassman standing in the bamboo forest swaying about.
That person remained quiet as he gave a stoic expression, scaring her.
But once she stood up frantically, he told her that she could continue to remain there and have her meal.
On that rainy day, she found him standing at a building, frowning as he looked at the sky whilst the downpour continued. She hesitantly reached her umbrella over, saying she wanted to give him a lift, and upon hearing that, he gave an expression that was either of repulse or doubt,
"Thank you."
He said.
"Let me hold this."
In a gentlemanly manner, he received the umbrella from Yū's hand.
They merely spoke to each other twice.
They were both very tense and lethargic.
That person was of an outstanding family, handsome, capable, intelligent, and a person from another world. She merely found it perplexing that others said she was trying to seduce him, to hook up with him.
She thought that person would be troubled that such rumors persisted and spread, and might even be angry about it.
After locking herself in her home, she never thought about him again.
But that upperclassman felt he had responsibility, and kept protecting her.
This really confused her, and yet touched her.
"Then, is the vengeful spirit… gone?"
Yū asked tentatively.
"No, the last one is still not dealt with yet."
Koremitsu's voice was very serious, causing Yū's heart to nearly stop once she heard it.
Why was his tone that terrifying?
"You're the only one who can chase this vengeful spirit away. It's in your heart."
"!"
She felt a chill rise up her back.
The sound of rain seemed to have grown louder.
"My… heart?"
She did not understand what Koremitsu was trying to get at.
But she was already terrified, trembling all over.
"You went to school on the day after your umbrella went missing, right?"
"No, that day… I wasn't at school."

Right, she was sprawled on the bed, crying that day. The pillow and sheets were drenched in the bitter and salty tears, and it had been raining outside the window continuously for two nights…
"No, you went to school before. Think about it carefully."
Koremitsu continued to question.
Yū's heart beat and raced, and the raindrops splattering the windows got louder and stronger.
She stuck the phone at her ear with her pale face, and suddenly had a strange feeling, that the reason was hitting on her directly.
Like the day when she, in a despaired state, ran home in the rain.
She lost her umbrella, was mocked by those girls, and ran home in the torrent that rained down hard like arrows. She was shivering on the way back muttering "I'll get eaten, I'll get eaten"…
And after that, she remained at home…
"On the day the girls who bullied you acted out that plan, someone saw you at school. Everyone thought that's your living spirit, and the rumors haven't disappeared even till now. But that's not your spirit, but yourself."
The visual images slowly replayed in her mind.
It was a heavy downpour that never stopped.
The white blouse was sticking on the body, and there was water dripping down the black pleated skirt.
Her uniform, hanging in the room, was thoroughly soaked, and the feeling of the skirt stuck on her thigh caused her to tremble in fear, to the extent of nausea…
Suddenly, she realized,
(Why did I wear a drenched uniform? Why did I wear a heavy skirt with the smell of rain?)
Where did she go while wearing that set of clothing?
She opened the door… walked down the stairs… and then…
Her mind was suddenly fuzzy, she was practically out of breath as she let out frantic panting.
Right, that day… I…
"Yes… I went… to school…"
There was only a plastic umbrella at the corridor, so she could only use that umbrella, continued to look around worriedly, and see if there was anyone else watching.
"What did you go to school for?"
"I wanted to go to the back garden… to get my umbrella back…"
Why am I saying such words?
It felt like it really happened. No, these are just words from a dream…
"Why did your umbrella end up there?"
"Because the umbrella dropped outside the window."
She wanted to grab the umbrella, but could not catch it. The umbrella fell down.
It was an uneven black torrent below.

The waves rose, and a fish opened its mouth wide…
"Who threw it down?"
The fish swallowed the umbrella…
"I did…"

I was the one who threw the umbrella down.

A breaking sound rang in her head.
The memories sealed for a long time saw the light of day again.
The rain that thoroughly drenched the windows, the umbrella rack along the corridor, the blue umbrella amidst the umbrellas of various colors.
The treasured umbrella that had provided shelter for Yū.
As long as she had this umbrella, she would not be afraid of other people's stare, not be afraid of other people's sneers. Even when her indoor shoes disappeared, when she could only walk down the corridors on slippers, when she open her textbooks to find things written inside, like 'vixen' or 'hooker', she would not be afraid. It did not matter even when she was hit by a basketball during physical education, and when she heard a sarcastic, laugh-riddled 'Sorry, I didn't mean it'…
Even if she were to be ostracized by others, it did not matter as long as she had an umbrella… it did not matter, it did not matter… it did not matter…
No, how could it not matter?
Those stares would continue to pierce through the umbrella, and their voices would sneak through the umbrella and enter her ears.
How long would she have to continue on like this? How long did she have to endure? Until the end of the first semester? The second? A year? Did she have to endure for three whole years?
I can't take this anymore!
As long as she had the umbrella, she could continue to endure.
Her parents were very happy when she could enter this highly prestigious, traditional school.
But later, her parents divorced; her mother went overseas, and her father made a new family with someone else.
In that case, what purpose was there to go to school again?
It was not because 'she could endure because she had an umbrella', rather 'she had to endure because she had an umbrella', was it not?
If the umbrella was gone, there would be no need to endure any further, was there?
For if she did not have an umbrella, she would have nothing to protect herself.
If she did not have the umbrella, she would not be able to go to school.
She would not need to go to school.
She fumbled about as she drew out that treasured umbrella of hers from the rack.
Once the window opened, the rain immediately fell on her face.

The sky was covered in thick clouds, and it was dark despite it being a day.
Upon looking down, the clout of trees were roaring loudly like a black wave.
The strong winds blew, blowing the trees to a point where they bent down.
After they straightened again, the cracks between the tree crowns resembled a fish's mouth, and she felt goosebumps rise on the back of her neck.
The hands reaching out of the window were stained with rain.
The fingers holding the umbrella handle lost their strength, and it immediately fell.
It slowly fell.
And it was gradually devoured.

The umbrella 'was eaten'.

Yū's mind went blank as she stumbled back to the classroom, and returned to her seat.
Something incorrigibly terrifying seemed to have just happened.
But what was it?
At first, when she first thought about it, there was cold sweat and loss of breath. Thus, she decided not to think about it.
In the end, an ominous premonition continued to prick at her as it expanded in her heart.
After school.
Yū's premonition became reality, and her umbrella really disappeared.
The umbrella that had been in the rack since morning had disappeared.

(Yes, I deliberately forgot that I dropped my umbrella.)

But on the next day, when she stayed at home and chose to skip school, sobbing on the bed, she saw the image of the umbrella falling into a large fish's mouth again.

(I thought—I had to get my umbrella back…)

She was the one who personally dropped it… but she felt she had to take her precious umbrella from the fish's mouth. She then changed into her uncomfortable drenched uniform, held a plastic umbrella in the middle of the rain, and returned to school.
She tentatively avoided the stares of the passers-by as she returned to school, and started looking for her umbrella.
She could not find it.
She rubbed her eyes, hoping to see clearly, bent down as she walked around, and even snuck into the shrubs, and finally found it.
She reached her arm out, but could not get it. The twigs and leaves cut the skin, causing blood trails to flow.

The obstructive plastic umbrella was thrown aside, and it rolled away as the wind blew. In the midst of the ongoing torrent, she knelt on the muddy ground, climbed on, and snuck into the shrubs.
Her hands and feet were stained in mud.
She finally managed to grab the handle of the umbrella, and pulled it out.
What appeared in front of her however was not her precious umbrella, but the wreckage of it.
It was eaten!
She would never get it back!
Yū held onto the icy remains of it as she ran home in the rain, utterly terrified of the image of the large fish chasing her down.
In the midst of despair, she knew there was nothing that could protect her.

Thus, Yū started to fear the rain, and did not dare to step outside the house.

"I… did everything… I threw away what protected me, the precious umbrella papa and mama bought for me on my birthday… I…"
She widened her eyes and muttered in shock.
Her body was frozen all over.
Lapis was still looking up at her.
"I'm the vengeful spirit? I was the one who ruined everything? Was 'I'… the one who was going to devour myself? That large black fish… that terrifying fish, was me?"
She was unable to breathe, her throat was quivering, her eyes all dizzy, and her head in a mind-splitting pain.
"Did everyone bully me because they knew I had a vengeful spirit?"
Lapis' body started to contort.
The fish stuck on the wall started to sway and gradually fade away.
The sea kingdom had collapsed.
She could no longer fall asleep peacefully.
This place was no longer safe!
For she was the vengeful spirit—
At that moment
"PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER! DON'T FALL INTO ANY RIDICULOUS DELUSIONS ANYMORE! DON'T GET YOURSELF SWALLOWED BY THE VENGEFUL SPIRIT IN YOUR HEART!"
A powerful voice rang in Yū's ears.
"I'M WITH YOU HERE! DON'T HOLE YOURSELF IN THE ROOM AND THINK OF SUCH PESSIMISTIC THINGS! OPEN THE DOOR!"
A firm voice rang from the cellphone.

(You're strong, but I…)

Yū was still hesitant, but that voice rang again.

This time, the voice came from beyond the door!

"DON'T LOSE THERE! YŪ! YOU HAVE TO LIVE ON WITH YOUR OWN STRENGTH!!"

Koremitsu was outside the door!
Yū's vision continued to waver.
But her heart had floated out of the door.

"But if you honestly face your feelings and try taking a step forward, perhaps you may understand."

Why did she search through the internet for someone she could discuss her love troubles with?
Why was she really hoping to see him?
She was utterly terrified of him, but why did she want to hear that angry-sounding voice?
Why was her heart so befuddled?
Why—
Koremitsu remained silent.
The only things that could be heard in the room were Yū's breathing and the sound of rain.
After a short silence that drew her attention away, a passionate, rasp—weak and dejected voice rang

"Yū, I want to meet you…"

The blanket slid down Yū's head, and she, who was left only with a sleeveless one-piece, found herself walking to the door.
She tottered barefooted as she stared right at the door.
She was staring at Koremitsu, who was outside the door.
She too wanted to convey them.
She wanted to convey her feelings for him.
She was always afraid, worried.
In the past, she felt that if she wanted to fall in love, it would have to be with Hikaru, for he would wholeheartedly accept her for who she was.
Whenever she was with him, she would not need to change.
She could keep the bliss she had up till this point.
But at this point, he was not the one who touched her heart, who supported her as she advanced on, but his friend—the owner of that clumsy, raspy voice.
Her fingers touched the door lock.
And there was the click of the door being unlocked.
And then, she turned the handle…

The first thing that entered her eyes was the red-haired youth with a serious expression, his mouth tightly sealed, his face looking very tense.
And then, it was the deep blue umbrella he held, followed by the rain behind him.
The sound of rain felt gradually distant and weaker as it reached her ears.

"I want to meet you too."

She stared at Koremitsu with teary eyes as she said this with a trembling voice.
She expressed the budded feeling when he was with her, that nurtured when she was unable to meet him, and realized,
I want to meet you. I want to meet you.
Koremitsu widened his eyes and gasped.
He could not believe these words as his face was all red, his eyebrows raised as he stared at Yū with that terrifying savage expression.
"...I said I'll help you get your umbrella back."
He muttered with his face numb. He closed his umbrella, left it at a side of the corner, removed his shoes, and walked in.
Upon hearing him mention about the umbrella, Yū suddenly recalled the terrifying memory she forgot for a while, and her bare shoulders started to shudder.

(My… umbrella…)

She held her breath as she watched Koremitsu's tense rear profile enter the room decisively.
Lapis wagged its tail as it followed behind.
At the wall, there were seashell decorations, the stove and fan her mother treasured, and the old golf bag her father used before.
Those were the towers of prayer for blessing for the fish.
Koremitsu grabbed the golf bag zipper and immediately pulled it open.
There was a space opened at that moment.
He then reached in, and pulled out the blue umbrella inside.
And he turned around.
Yū wanted to pull at the blanket and cover herself, but it had already dropped onto the floor.
His eyes blazing, Koremitsu stared at Yū,
"Found it."
He said it clearly.
Yū's heart started to pound at a maddening rate, and Koremitsu remained where he was, his eyes unflinching as he opened the umbrella in front of her.
(Don't!)

The ribs of the umbrella were bent, the surface was stained all over, and there was a large hole.
What was originally a bright pretty visage could no longer be seen, and only those remained.
Lapis let out a soft squeal, ostensibly mourning for it.
(I did it…)
This was the decisive proof.
Her legs weakened, and looked ready to fall over anytime.
Koremitsu let go of the broken umbrella's handle.
It fell to the floor in its damaged state.
"This umbrella can't be used anymore."
His tone was nonchalant, direct and without any restraint as he narrated the truth . Once he let go of the umbrella, he reached his bare hand over to Yū, who was surprised.

"Let's go."

He curled his lips aside in an embarrassed manner.
There was still rain on the outside.
There was no umbrella.
There was nothing that could provide shelter for them.
However…

"Okay."

Yū nodded, and held Koremitsu's hand.
It was a warm hand.
The fingers were firm.
And they were holding onto Yū's hand tightly.
Koremitsu walked towards the corridor, and Yū nervously followed.
Lapis too arrived at the door, and sat down obediently.
"Do you have any shoes?"
"Y-Yes."
Yū hurriedly opened her shoe closet, took out a pair, and put them on.
Those were the leather shoes she wore to school, but her feet had shrunk, probably because she was not wearing socks, or that she had not left home for so long, that her shoes were loose and wobbly. Once her toes went in, her ankle slipped in as well.
Koremitsu held on to her hand the entire time as she put on her shoes.
The door was still left open after Koremitsu entered,
And it was still raining outside.
"Meow!"
Lapis seemed to be watching them leave as it let out a soft cry.
Koremitsu did not take the umbrella he just placed at the side of the corridor.

He stared at Yū and held her hand apparently telling her it’s fine before walking outside.
The roof was not doing its job well, and the icy rain drops hit Yū on the face, shoulders and arms.
After walking through the passage, Koremitsu pulled Yū's hand hard as he ran towards the rain.

"I'm going to show you something you can only see outdoors!"

He proclaimed loudly and dragged Yū as he raced through the rain with blinding speed.
The sound of rain splattering brushed by above their heads.
Yū's hair, clothes and body were completely soaked, and her water-filled shoes dripped all over as they chase after the rain.However, Koremitsu continued to grab hold of her, and did not allow her to stop and be afraid.
Whenever her soles slid, and when she was about to fall, Koremitsu would exert strength and pull Yū up.
Yū was dragged along at his mercy as she continued to run hard.
She was panting, her mind heated.
Her heart was pounding to a point where it could nearly jump out from her throat.
I'm actually running in the midst of such a scary rain!
It was terrifyingly dark when she saw the outside through the apartment's corridor, but the outside was brighter than she thought
The alley, which diverged into different paths, had bungalows or apartment blocks flanking it on both sides, and the door of a civilian residence was surrounded with flower pots of cute pretty red flowers flourishing. At the foot of the wall belonging to the next residence, there were yellow roses in full bloom.
The tree at the opposite yard had lush green leaves dripping with dew, and there were bell-shaped frills hanging between the twigs.
Such scenery appeared beside them as they raced through, and while running, Yū seemed to hear a gentle, delightful voice.

—On my way here today, I saw the Morning Glory planted here, and they were as bright red as a ribbon, as cute as a girl maturing early, asking her mother for help in tying it.

—The floral language of the yellow Rose is 'envy', 'departed love', or 'breaking up', so some do not think it is suitable for giving to others, but it also has a hidden meaning of 'trying to love', or 'friendship'.

—I do not hate the yellow Rose, so whenever I pass by those roses when I go to your house, I will stop and talk with them, hoping that they would see me in my best condition.

(Did Hikaru walk down this road?)

Were the clumps of yellow Roses and Morning Glories the ones Hikaru talked? That white flower too?

—The American Catalpa flowers grow between the green heart-shaped leaves, and the petals are like the frills of a skirt, fluttering in the wind, like a group of innocent princesses chatting away. Anyone will not help but smile when they see them. The white flowers also have purple and yellow spots on them, and they resemble some ingenious decoration. They are really cute, and I hope they blossom soon.

Whenever they talked about flowers, Hikaru looked adorable and excited, and his tone would become sweet, clear and refreshing.
She loved to hear Hikaru talk about flowers.
She would hear what sort of flower it was, how it looked, where it bloomed, how it grew, and would imagine it according to his description, which excited her.
She was really looking forward to it.
Towards the world he talked about, the flowers he described.
Like a beautiful, colorful dream.
But at this moment, Yū realized the assortment of colors was not a dream.
(There's so many vibrant colors outside!)
She continued to be dragged by Koremitsu, and continued to run as she whiffed at the sweet fragrance of the white Wisteria.
There was a park in front of her eyes, filled completely with green.
"Over there!"
Koremitsu, with rain all over his face, turned to face Yū as he said energetically,
"You must definitely see this! That's what Hikaru told me!"
(Hikaru…?)
Yū saw a blue world.
Soon after entering the park, there was a lake, and there were many coquettish flowers of white, purple, and pale blue. They resembled Rabbit-ear Irises and Sanguinea Irises, but were actually Japanese Irises!
Hikaru had told her of this before!

—The Japanese Irises growing at the side of the park's lake are like fair maidens.Their leaves are sharp, and they are hard to approach, but their petals are tender, delicate, refined and graceful. They're really enchanting.

—Do you know how to distinguish between Rabbit-ears, Sanguinea and Japanese Irises? If the bottom of the petals are white, they are Rabbit-ears. If yellow, they are Japanese Irises. Also, if there is a web-shaped floral

pattern at the bottom, they would be Sanguinea. These flowers are similar, and vary a little, but they all have their own charm!

The floral bed surrounded by rocks were filled with pale blue and purple Hydrangeas. Hikaru mentioned before that the Hydrangea was a Japanese flower that existed since the Manyō era. Its name could be written as 'Gathering of Blue', for it was said it was named after this aspect.
The large violet flowers climbing up on the side must be the Clematis. Hikaru once said with a delighted expression that it resembled a very intellectual looking, talented big sister staring at someone else.
There were budding little indigo flowers growing on the narrow stem of the Hummingbird Sage, and there was a transparent dew resting on the gentle petals of the Commelina.

—Once the blooming season ends, it will be the rainy season, the world will be nutritioned by the rain, and there will be blue and purple flowers there. Hikaru mentioned before that there were all sorts of flowers that bloom in the rain, and that it would be prettier, brighter, more majestic and more full of life than what Yū could imagine.

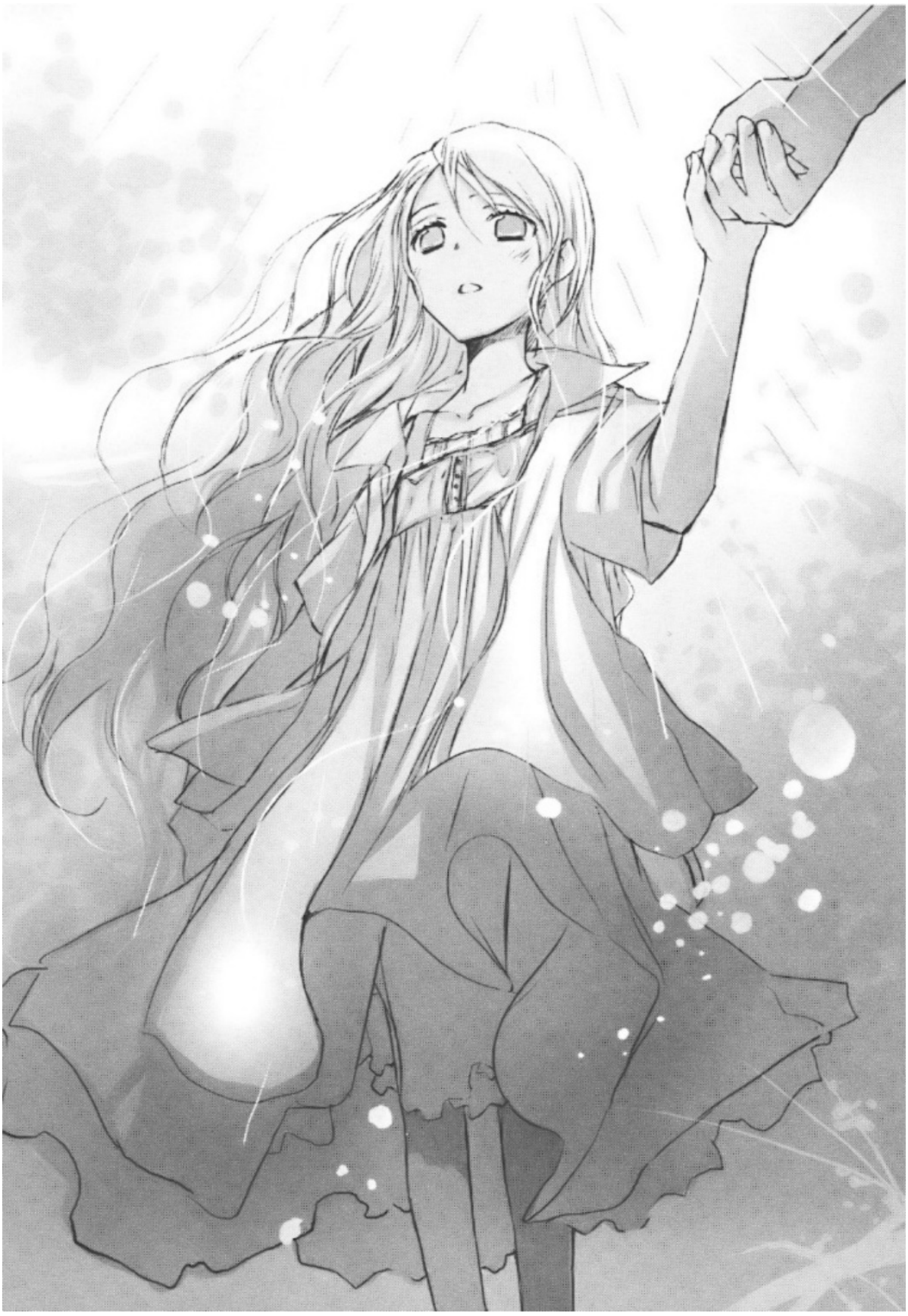
(This is the scene Hikaru saw before, the flowers he treasured.)

(The blue on the land has filled the entire world!)

Koremitsu suddenly widened his eyes in surprise and muttered away. His stare continued to sway.
For some reason, he removed his shirt to reveal a T-shirt underneath, and with a blushing face, he handed the shirt over to Yū saying,
"Put it on. It's better than nothing."
Yū found her thin one-piece drenched completely, to a point where it could be seen through, and blushed in embarrassment.
Koremitsu's shirt was already drenched—but it was large, and could cover her slender body within.
(It's warm…)
Koremitsu turned and looked away awkwardly. It was unknown who took the initiative, but they held hands again.
The touch of the fingertips felt cozy.
Yū continued to walk with Koremitsu, hand in hand, sometimes amazed by the dangling white Sorbara Sorbifolia, sometimes smiling at the needle-like blady grass at the lakeside, with several strands of silvery-white furs, and would sometimes stop in her tracks and lose herself as she stare at the light purple flowers at her feet.

(Even in the rain, all the flowers are trying their best to blossom. No, it's because they're in the rain…)

Whenever Hikaru visited Yū, he would bring along some photos of the sea. But though he loved flowers so much, he would only describe them excitedly, and would never bring photos of them along, and never once did he take photos of them with his cellphone and show them to her.
Why was that?
At this moment, she started to understand what Hikaru was thinking after seeing all the flowers in the park on this rainy day.
"Hikaru… must have wanted me to see this."
She held onto Koremitsu's hand as she listened to the rain, thoroughly touched as she said this.
The colors of the flowers.
The fragrance of the plants.
The breezy feeling of the wind, the grace of the rain bestowed upon the land. He hoped for her not to imagine it, but to witness it personally, to touch it, to feel it, to personally experience the wonder of nature.



He hoped for her to understand the beauty of the world.
He hoped she experience it with her mind and body.
That certainly must have been what Hikaru was thinking?
"Yeah."
Koremitsu—Hikaru's friend, answered definitively.
Hikaru was right in front of Yū, nodding gently to her. Koremitsu looked aside, and then stared at Yū with a gentle expression as he said with certain happiness.

—That's right, Yū.

She could practically hear Hikaru's voice through Koremitsu, and saw an image of Hikaru smiling in front of them… suddenly, there was a sense of nostalgia.
"Is this Hikaru's promise?"
Koremitsu's eyes suddenly became gloomy.
He seemed to have trouble enduring the pain in his heart as he stared at Yū sadly, and after a pause,
"Yeah… that's right."
Koremitsu answered with an adamant tone, seemingly to have made some sort of decision with conviction.
"It's a very important promise."
His face was extremely tense, and his eyes looked more mature than usual. He seemed to know something Yū did not know of, but was enduring that pain alone. Upon seeing this, Yū felt her heart flutter.
Both of them were drenched in the rain together, viewing the same scene together, but she had a feeling, a lonely feeling of waiting for Koremitsu to visit, and a strong expectant feeling, hoping to erase that loneliness.
(What's with this feeling?)
It felt sad, anxious, sweet yet bitter, and there was some unrest—
(Why did Akagi look for me? After I said such harsh words to him, why did he still call for me so insistently? Because of his promise with Hikaru? Is that it?)
When she opened the door, she found Koremitsu, his eyes blazing, right in front of her; her heart felt riveted, impulsive, and the feeling infected her throat, eyes and fingertips.
Yū subconsciously held Koremitsu's hand, and he was startled as he turned to Yū.
His red hair was completely soaked, and the rain trekked down his forehead and cheeks.
He had lent his shirt to Yū, and the drenched T-shirt was sticking to his body. He looked really cold.
His troubled eyes were staring at Yū from under the raised eyebrows.

He seemed to be worried, thinking that he might have made Yū angry—and opened his mouth bewilderedly, but could only make a groan, unable to form a sentence.
That clumsy expression caused Yū's heart to ache, and she felt the urge to cry too as she continued to stare at him.

(Akagi… I—I)

Koremitsu's mouth opened in a stiff manner, his eyes showing weakness and pain as he gazed at Yū.
Hikaru once said that one could tell if the other was in love through the look in the eyes.

(Akagi, I really—)
Her intercrossed fingers felt the increased strength from Koremitsu. His hand was wet, but was it due to the rain? Or due to the sweat?
Yū too was no less nervous than Koremitsu.
But she tried her best to express with her eyes how special the feeling that filled her heart was.
She really wanted to see him, and was practically unable to control her impulse.
Whether it was Hikaru, Tōjō, or anyone else, she never felt this sad, this hesitant.
Her heart was racing so fast she was panting. Their stares were too fixated, even the eyes were burning.
(I really like…)
Koremitsu's eyes looked really passionate too. Her fingers, held in his hand, were almost breaking apart from the pain.
But upon seeing the similar hesitant look he showed, Yū felt really delighted, and his passionate stare caused her to feel emotionally uplifted from the sweetness.
(Yes, Hikaru… I can really tell from the eyes whether he's in love. No, not just the eyes, even the eyebrows, lips, fingers, the breathing…)
Koremitsu's eyes were blazing intensely.
The frustrated-looking tight eyebrows, the thoroughly red face, the trembling lips, the heavy breath from the mouth, and the sharp pain felt from the fingertips.
All these aspects revealed his feelings.
Her eyes soaking wet, Yū smiled.
(We're the same.)
She lifted her head up with a blissful feeling, raised her lips, and stared at those eyes with a loving expression.
This must have been what it meant to attract others.
Wanting to pull the other person's heart over… a serious yearning of contact, for each other, for them to be one.

The moment Yū smiled, Koremitsu narrowed his eyes, ostensibly in sadness, and brought his face over tentatively.
The tightly clasped hands were held tightly.
Yū's fingers were numb to a point where she could not feel anything.
But her heart was filled with delight.
Her heart had pulled Koremitsu's heart close to her.
Their lips overlapped stiffly.
The moist softness was cold, and had the taste of sweat and rain.
She closed her eyes, allowed herself to be drawn into the ecstasy of her entire body melting within. She felt apprehension, fearful and embarrassed, but was yet delighted, infatuated, blissful.
Ever blissful…

—You will learn of the delight of love one day, definitely.

Hikaru was no longer on this world.
But Yū had the feeling he was always nearby, looking at her with gentle eyes, and said quietly in her heart,

(Hikaru, I've fallen in love! I've fallen in love with your friend!)

Thank you, Hikaru.
Thank you for teaching me about all these flowers! Thank you for letting me see this blue world, and these flowers!
I want to be stronger. No, I have to be stronger!
I definitely have to be stronger.
Yū's eyes opened, found the rain had stopped, and the light shining through the clouds brightened the park.
It felt like the last present Hikaru gave her.

—Farewell, Yū, I hope you will see more wonderful scenes in the future.

◊ ◊ ◊

Hey, Koremitsu.
When I left the details vague after entrusting Yū to you, I did not do it just because I was amused by how you were panicking over your first love.
I am not that devious, and neither am I that mean. If my only friend misunderstands me, it will be really depressing.
Hm? You saying that I need to help out as a friend, and not pretend to play dead or give a cold bystander look as if I understand everything?
It cannot be helped. I am not 'pretending to be dead', I am already dead.
I left Yū to you not because I did not love her.
On the contrary,

Yū is not a girlfriend of mine, but she is a girl I really treasured, and I really hoped she would have a blissful life.
It is because of that that I am so hesitant.
To Yū, what exactly is happiness? Is it really the best thing to pull her out from that room? Even after death, I still could not answer the question.
In essence, Yū is just like me.
We are scared of being hurt, and scared of hurting others. We just want to remain in a quiet closed space, living in a peaceful, constant life.
I did not yearn for Yū in any way.
Yū too did not yearn for me either.
We just remained as who we were, and interacted while maintaining a fixed distance.
Our relationship was stale and relaxing. I could gain solace whenever there is anyone who can accept me for who I am.
Whenever I am tired of chasing after girls, or is wooed, but unable to return an equal amount of favor, and feel hurt or empty within, I will look for Yū and find comfort in that eternal silence.
Those were peaceful moments for me.
Thus, I understood more than anyone Yū's unwillingness to leave the house, and I did not find it to be anything bad.
Some flowers only bloom at night.
Nobody can decisively conclude the wonderful, fragrant white flowers that bloom in the cold moonlight are more unfortunate than those that bask under the radiant sunlight.
If it is a flower that is not imprisoned in the night, but that it liked it, and hoped for it, is it not happiness? Is it not too much to put a flower that is full of life under the moonlight to wilt under the harsh sunlight?
But because of certain circumstances, I can no longer become a frivolous harem prince.
At this point, I still cannot tell you the reason for it, and I am really sorry for that.
Because I still have not sorted out my thoughts. If I say it out not, I will definitely be more confused.
Perhaps on one of these days, I will tell you a long story…
Yes…it is because of this that I did something inappropriate before Golden Week, and enraged Mr Shungo and the others. But I really cannot continue on.
Anyway, there was a sudden transition, and because of that, I decided to break up with all the other girls and date Miss Aoi seriously.
You know about that…ah? Is kissing another girl while riding on a horse at the turf considered cheating? Eh, that is an accident…the girl invited me to kiss, so how can I refuse in front of others? This will cause her to lose pride…goodness, I did say that is not cheating!
Okay then, back to the main point. When Mr Shungo requested me to break up with Yū, I knew I had to leave her sooner or later.

Thus, I promised him that I would let Yū return to the outside world.
To be honest, it was really difficult.
I did just mention the reason too, for I really understood Yū's wish to continue staying in the house.
I suppose I would not be able to do so.
I love how flowers remain as their original selves.
I can accept everything about flowers.
I can express myself according to the other person's wishes, or say what the other person wants, and I want this to happen too.
But this is my limit.
It is a cowardly act to fully submit to the other person's wishes.
That is basically an avoidance of conflicts, redirecting of responsibilities, running from any hurt that may come with conflicts, refusal to improve—I, who is willing to accept everything, is too afraid to deny anything.
For my denial may hurt the other person, and break up a love that was built for a long time.
Since I chose to continue living a life where we could feel comfort, I had no right to make any decision.
To put it simply, the reason why I acted aloof was actually because I had no confidence. Will you be less angry after hearing this?
You do not believe me? Because I am a frivolous harem prince seeking girls every single day? This is true. I am more knowledgeable of how to please a girl.
But Koremitsu,
I really had no confidence in my decision.
I was always feeling troubled alone.
Even I was hesitant about telling you the way to prevent losing Yū. I was worried you would be stuck in a labyrinth, unable to escape, just like I was, and choose the other path I chose…
But Koremitsu, you exceeded my limits every time.
You are really courageous, able to take the initiative, and straightforward. You are not scared of being denied or destroyed, and rather think about others even if it means hurting both sides. You definitely would not abandon her, and continue to move forward.
That was why I chose this precious flower, my solace, to you.
I already guessed Yū would be attracted to you.
Yū and I are alike; there is no way she will not fall for my best friend, and will understand you well. I also know you will definitely change Yū.
You really did not fail my expectations.
Thank you for letting Yū see that scenery.
Thank you for letting her understand that the world outside is not just of pain and sadness, but is also filled with many beautiful flowers.
Yū will definitely grow stronger.
From now on, she definitely can walk on through her own will, and find many wonderful things in this vast world.

This is all the things you brought to her.

...hey, I am praising you here. Why are you crying away?

Well, since you are heartbroken, I suppose I shall let you cry on, right?
I already reminded you that if you chase Yū's vengeful spirit away and bring her outside, you will lose her.
Yū is a girl who is like a pixie.
She is gentle within, and is very shy though she is calm, and is as innocent as a child. Once she falls for someone, she will reach out to the other person, like a Gourd flower extending its vines, climbing up a nearby fence with its tendrils.
Like how the girls have an illusion of being the true love for me, the white Gourd flower can be dyed by any color, and is an illusion men look to.
It is a miracle that appears only at night, hazy yet magical.
Having fallen for Yū, you must have realized that for sure.
Once she step outside, Yū will not remain as she was.
In the morning, the flower will wilt, and the girl in the fantasy will gradually disappear like morning dew.
You once said to me adamantly that you do not care even if this is the case.
At that time, you refused the other choice, refused the advice I gave, and that really touched me.
You are saying a ghost being touched is not going to make you happy?
That you will cry harder in the future if you do not cry now?
Well, I guess it cannot be helped. I shall lend you my shoulder to cry on then.
You cannot lean on me anyway? Please stop flaring your temper while waving your fist at me. The sight of your twitching eyebrows is already a terrifying image.
Okay then, just lean over and cry.
You already worked hard.
You are really a hero.
Yū has fallen for you too.
Let me tell you this, Koremitsu. Love is just a temporal illusion, but the sweetness and blissfulness it brings to people is definitely not. Like even how a flower disappears, the color and fragrance will forever linger in your heart.
So I just want to bid a gentle farewell to the flowers who brought me happiness.
Even if it is selfish, self-conceited, I hope they will abstain from agony and tears, and head towards the future with a cheerful feeling. I want to give them the best farewell.

While I am still on Earth……

Epilogue - Someday, The Smiling Face

"Is all your luggage here?"
"...Yes. I threw away a lot of things after much deliberation, and this is the only one left."
Yū raised the bright sky blue suitcase and pet carrying case as she smiled radiantly.
It was a few days after Koremitsu dragged Yū out of the house, and ran in the rain…
The sky was clear, there were no clouds to be seen, and the bright sunlight rained down on their heads.
Yū was in front of her apartment, waiting for a taxi.
Later, she would be headed to the airport.
She chose to finish the school leaving procedures, live with her mother in Australia, and continue her education there.
"Oh...well, it certainly is more convenient to travel with."
Koremitsu wanted to chat as if it was normal, but he was still sobbing away, and it seemed he would bawl out if he relaxed in the slightest.

—Once Yū's vengeful spirit is liberated, she will go to Australia.

On the day Koremitsu declared to Asai he would protect Yū, Hikaru said this to him with conviction.

—Yū's mother has been calling her, telling her to live together in Australia, but she refused every single time. However, her father is increasingly burdened and unable to pay for her living expenses.

There was no choice for Yū but to go to Australia.
However, she did not dare leave her apartment, let alone suffer in a foreign country with a language she was unacquainted with, and she'd rather die at home.

—If you do not do anything, perhaps you might be able to maintain the current situation.

Hikaru was ostensibly saying something he did not want to as his tone was weak and dejected, his expression gloomy and dull.

—There is no way Yū's parents will want to see their daughter starve to death...they will probably continue to send her financial aid. In that case, Yū will be able to have her usual happiness, and you can have Yū, who belongs to you.

However, Koremitsu stared at Hikaru, and answered that it did not matter even if he could not meet Yū. He had to chase the vengeful spirit away and prevent her from crying whenever she recalled the past.
On the day they were viewing flowers in the park, Yū and Koremitsu were seated side by side on the bench, talking,
"...Papa did not send any money over since the last month. He told me over the phone that his new wife has a new child, and he has no ability to provide any living means for me. He even apologized to me and told me to go to mama."
The sun was shining brightly after the rain stopped, and Yū lowered her head dejectedly,
"I threw a tantrum and ignored papa and mama's advice. I thought they only cared about their new families or job, that nobody really cared about me, that I might as well just die, and I really hope I can die in my sleep...it's as you said, I'm...running away from reality..."
Though she was sad, she was trying her best to talk with her teeny-weeny voice.
Thus, Koremitsu was paying utmost attention to her.
"I don't know whether I can get along well with mama once I get to Australia. She's a very shrewd and practical person...she never liked my attitude, and always taught me to be more proactive, or told me to get out and move, and even said I'm very stubborn, and I need to make more friends. It really caused me a lot of pressure...I can't handle being in a school in Japan; it'll be much tougher for me when I go to Australia to study, and I may end up being bullied. I'm really scared when I think about this..."
Her hand, which was holding Koremitsu's, started to tremble, but she lifted her head gingerly,
"I...won't run away. You brought me out of that room, and showed me so many wonderful things in the outside world beyond my imagination."
She was really trying her best to convey her feelings to Koremitsu.
"I'm going to look for mama there and work hard. I won't run away this time."
And so, Koremitsu answered her.
He resisted the urge to call her to stay, and tried his best to speak with an encouraging tone.

"Sure, go for it."

(The furthest I went was Osaka during my Middle School graduation tour, and now she's flying to the Southern continent!? The seasons are complete opposite here! Isn't that too far, damn it!)
Koremitsu had cried out and voiced his grievances to Hikaru the previous day, and thus, on this day, he tried his best not to cry, and closed his eyes and lips hard. Hikaru however showed a mature expression as he watched Koremitsu from sidelong.
"Do you regret it?"
After Hikaru had asked this the previous day, Koremitsu answered with snot and tears riddled on his face,
"Don't be stupid. Of course I'm not regretting this one bit."
The efforts would all be wasted if he were to cry at this point. Hikaru would certainly tease him for being such a crybaby despite his appearance.
But when he saw the taxi approach, he still felt his heart ache.
Yū too was startled, and looked over at Koremitsu worriedly.
Her hands that were holding onto the suitcase trembled, her eyebrows were drooping down, and her face was pale.
Koremitsu wanted to cry, and Yū looked ready to cry soon as she said with a perplexed tone,
"Akagi...actually, I..."
The taxi stopped in front of Yū.
With a crying face, Yū staring at Koremitsu with tears in her eyes.
If he spoke up and asked her to stay—if he reached out to grab Yū's hand, pull her close, and tell her not to leave—I'll think of a way to protect you somehow, perhaps Yū might nod her head.
Perhaps she might always stay with him.
This impulse swept through Koremitsu like a storm.
"Actually, I..."
Her moist eyes and pale lips were trembling with anxiety.
She was to head to a distant country with a language she was unfamiliar, with no friends. She would be alone, and for an introverted girl like her, there was no doubt she was terrified. She must have been afraid, terrified to a point where she was unable to handle it.
It was still not too late. There was still a chance for him not to lose her.
As long as he said not to go—

—I...won't run away. You brought me out of that room.

The words Yū managed to eke out with her voice at the park after the rain rang in his mind again.

This was the first time Yū, who was always hiding in a corner of the room, draped over with a blanket, decided something on her own will.
Koremitsu clenched his fists and yelled,
"WHETHER IT'S IN THE PAST OR THE FUTURE, TELL ME ABOUT ANY TROUBLE YOU HAVE IMMEDIATELY! WHETHER IT'S BY CALL OR MESSAGE! DON'T HIDE ALONE AND BROOD OVER IT! I'LL PROTECT YOU NO MATTER WHERE YOU GO!"
Yū's face showed a frown.
"Akagi…"
In fact, he really hoped to see Yū attend school again, make a bunch of new friends, and live her school life happily.
This was not because he was lavishly hoping she would have lunch with him, that they would attend and leave together school together. For him, it would be enough to see her being happy as long as they were in the same place.
This was the last little wish Koremitsu hoped for.
However, he did not regret it.
No matter whether it was chasing the vengeful spirit with all his might, or dragging Yū out to run in the rain,
Or it was when he kissed her with just apprehension in the park.
At this moment, he was to watch her leave.
And he would definitely, definitely not regret it!
Like Koremitsu, Yū too widened her eyes as she held her tears back, and clenched her fists tightly.
"Yes, thank you. I'm fine."
She tried to act optimistic as she said with a trembling voice. At this moment, her pet carrying case shook.
"Eh…? Lapis?"
The lid opened, and it immediately leapt out agilely and crept to Koremitsu.
Lapis walked towards Koremitsu and Hikaru, and swayed its tail vigorously.
It then proceeded to turn around and lie down. The Lapis-colored eyes were looking up at Yū, ostensibly ready to send Yū off together with Koremitsu's group.
Yū seemingly returned back to her life when she hid in the cramped room under the blue blanket as she showed a fearful, dumbfounded expression.
Soon after, she bit her lips hard, ostensibly hiding her pain.
With a sense of loneliness and thanksgiving mixed within, she said,
"So Lapis...you want to leave me too. Up till now...I had been a scaredy cat, and wouldn't let you go out. I'm sorry...thank you for being with me all this while…"
Lapis let out a clear purr, seemingly saying she was no longer a scaredy cat.
With Lapis, Koremitsu and Hikaru watching, Yū sat on the taxi.
From the window, she said,
"Akagi, I won't be a flow that blooms in the night anymore. I'll become a flower that blooms towards the sun."

Her cheerful eyes were filled with tears as she smiled.
"When we meet the next time, I'll show that I've become a girl who likes to smile."
Koremitsu too wanted to smile to her.
But no matter how hard he tried to raise his lips or move his face, his body would not obey. His throat and eyes were heating up, and the salty and bitter fluids nearly overflow, to a point where he had to try his best to hold it in.
"Eh…yes."
Koremitsu frowned and tried his best to squeeze out a flat voice. He wanted to smile and make Yū relax more, but he just could not do so no matter what.
The taxi departed away, and Yū's silhouette gradually shrank.
(If you have any trouble, say it out! I'll rush over to you…b-but…I hope such a thing will never happen again! It doesn't matter even if we don't meet. It'll be a thousand times better as long as you're happy! It's fine even if you don't call or send a message!)
Lapis was sticking at his feet, and Hikaru patted him on the shoulder.
"Uuu…~"
Koremitsu still ended up breaking down in tears.

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The next day,
Koremitsu's eyebrows were raised higher than usual, his lips tightly curled, his eyes bloodshot as he went to school, and his classmates backed off from him in fear.
There was a new rumor in school, saying 'he was a delinquent more terrifying than a vengeful spirit'.
"I heard he challenged the vengeful spirit barehanded."
"Even the vengeful spirit was scared away by that delinquent."
This rumor of unknown origin instantly spread throughout the school, but Koremitsu was currently not in the mood to bother with that.
After school, he was at the parapet on the roof, and there was a breeze with a breath of summer.
A plane flew by the blue sky.
Yū must have reached there already.
The 'pixie girl' with the gentle smile had disappeared.
Despite some loneliness, he felt contented for being able to see such a radiant smile from Yū.
That was most likely Koremitsu's first love.
He inadvertently reflected on it, wondering how many times Hikaru went through such turbulent moments of meetings and separation?
Hikaru too floated beside Koremitsu and looked afar with a calm expression, albeit mixed with some loneliness.

—I want to give them the best farewell.

Hikaru had once stated this before.
He did not want to give his beloved flowers atonement or repentance, but a gentle farewell.
Every flower,
Every love,
He really loved them from the bottom of his heart.
Those were treasured memories that were irreplaceable.
Perhaps he was not just a frivolous casanova of a young man.
(I think I'm starting to understand what he feels)
Hikaru too would be lost, and afraid.
But he tried his best to think for others. His smile and sweet talk was not for himself, but to comfort the wounded hearts of others.
In his heart, there was a blue, lonely, peaceful ocean.

—In essence, Yū is just like me.

—We are scared of being hurt, and scared of hurting others. We just want to remain in a quiet closed space, living in a peaceful, constant life.

Why did Hikaru still remain on this world even after?
Why would he sometimes look in a distant place alone?
There were still many things Koremitsu did not understand.
However…
(As long as Hikaru remains on Earth, I'll continue to be with him until the end.)
Koremitsu leaned towards the fence as he said to this enigmatic friend of his,
"Are you 100m closer to Heaven now?"
"Yeah."
Hikaru answered gently, his golden dazzling hair swaying gently.
"Then I better get ready and practise how to smile."
"Yes, if you send me off with that smile you showed to those girls in the chemistry classroom, I think I will still have some psychological trauma in my reincarnation."
"OKAY, DON'T MENTION THAT INCIDENT AGAIN!"
"They said your smile is more terrifying than a vengeful spirit."
"DON'T SAY IT!!!"
Koremitsu was flushed red as he roared out at the teasing Hikaru.
In the future, he would have to learn how to smile.
If, on one day, he would have to separate from an important person again, he had to brighten that person's heart with a smile.
He would have to endure the pain of separation and earnestly bless the person who was leaving.

He would have to show an indomitable, firm smile, and tell the other person he is alright.
"Koremitsu, do you know the floral language of yellow Roses? Not the large ones though. The small one. The very cute kind."
"How do I know? Why are you asking me this out of a sudden? Stop acting now and just tell me directly if you want to."
"Yes yes."
Hikaru was ostensibly demonstrating as he showed his most radiant smile to the frowning Koremitsu.
"It is to 'leave with a smile'."

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"I heard Miss Kanai went to Australia to live with her mother."
In the bamboo forest at the back yard, Hiina Oumi said this with a deliberate tone to Shungo Tōjō, who was staring at the stone monument.
"So Mr Akagi really fulfilled that 'promise'."
"...I guess."
He uttered without looking back.
"It seems he's really good friends with Lord Hikaru. He must have heard quite a few things from the latter, maybe he'll say everything if we agitate him."
Shungo however showed a stern expression on his face as he interrupted that clear voice of hers.
"Don't spread that sort of message again. This method is too underhanded."
"I would say it is the best method to lure out the murderer. Also, the one spreading the rumors about Yū kanai was not me. If you suspect anything…"
"I am not suspecting you."
"...Are you still having a grudge that I stated you're the culprit behind this in front of Mr Akagi? That's an act to lure out information about how Mr Akagi is like~ and also, the Matriarch Asa will view that I have no relationship with you, so it's a good plan that kills two birds with one stone. Did I go overboard with the acting?"
She said with an unconcerned tone.
"I'm not having any grudges over anything."
"Of course, you aren't such a petty person after all, Upperclassman!"
Hiina spoke with a deliberate cheerful, voice, and then said sternly like a completely changed person.
"I do feel the one sending the rumors that hurt Yū Kanai through the mails...must have been someone who truly loved Lord Hikaru. Right, it must have been someone who loved him so much to a point of killing off."
At this point, Shungo was wondering what kind of expression was Hiina showing on her face exactly.
Was it a mature, aloof expression that was very unsuitable for her?
Or was it that of an innocent youth's, enjoying the moment.
He pondered for a while, but did not want to look back and confirm.
However—

Shungo recalled the moment when he met Hikaru at the turf course in Shinshu, that hollow and fragile smile of his when Shungo acted rudely to him, and the wound on his wrist…
(I really couldn't ask at that sort of moment.)
This incident would still remain in his heart.
Perhaps one day, it would be an ace that would change the relationship between the Tōjōs and the Mikados…
Right, there was no time to be depressed over Yū Kanai.
The more aces he had in his hand, the better. Because of this, he silently accepted Hiina's presence.
Shungo continued on to the classroom, and never looked at Hiina once even till the end.
He seemed to hear Hiina's soft voice of admiration from behind,
"…We shall always be allies, big brother."
It was really soft.
Shungo however pretended not to hear and walked off without looking back.

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Koremitsu looked back, and found Honoka standing behind with a worried look.
"…It's about time for class."
She said to him nervously.
Koremitsu had sent her a message the previous day, informing her of Yū's actions in finishing the procedures to leave school, and that she flew off to Australia the previous day.
Honoka did not mention about that, but rather, walked towards his side cautiously, and reached her hand to grab the fence. If he was to keep staying here and not attend class, it was very likely Honoka would stay behind to accompany him.
(As expected…she's really a good person."
Just when Koremitsu was about to say, "Let's head back to class", he found Honoka, with her head turned towards him, stare at him with a convicted expression.
"…?"
She stared at a puzzled looking Koremitsu with a timid look on her face, and with a trembling—and serious voice, she said,

"I'm sorry for saying this at this time—but, I think, I like you."

Footnote

I don't wish for this love to become a dream.
I definitely won't allow you to selfishly make any changes.
This would be a betrayal to those maddening days.
You definitely can't change it.
Whether it's your feelings, or mine, all will have to remain as they are.
So...
So...

Hikaru, on that day, I stood behind your back—

Side Story - Shungo Toujou's view -- That is Definitely Not Love!

The first time Shungo Tōjō met Hikaru Mikado, it was during the beginning of Winter in his second year of Middle School at Heian Academy.
He was with his parents, visiting their relatives, the Saotomes, and found a cute, pretty child playing with his cousin—Aoi—planting bulbs in the garden together. That would be Hikaru.
That child's round face was pink on the cheeks, and the wide eyes with long narrow eyebrows let out a brilliance of purity whilst his muddy hands were digging the dirt beside the bulbs.
That soft, light brown hair looked dazzling like gold under the clear sun of winter, and the person was practically an Angel from a picture book.

(Who is that girl playing with Aoi there?)

It was really rare to see the shy Aoi play with someone other than Asai.
Aoi's face was completely red, her mouth pouting tightly as she seemed to be angry.
Whenever that girl spoke to Aoi with a bright smile, Aoi would immediately look away flustered.
However, whenever she turned and talked to Asai, who was growing plants with her on the other side, Aoi would shyly glance to the side, and then blush and look to the other side again.
Aoi and Asai were in the First Year of Middle School, a year younger than Shungo.
Was that girl of the same age as them?
Unknowingly, that girl was the only thing in his eyes.
Aoi and her friend, Asai, had long, glamourous hair, and were exceptionally outstanding beauties with no particular defects to speak of. However, the girl beside them was no less inferior, and was even the fairest of them all.
Shungo felt an inexplicable allure from her, and that was a characteristic the girls around him never once had.
That girl suddenly stood up and tottered her way towards the storage shed in the garden.
She wanted to move a large bag of fertilizer, and though she managed to carry it, she was moving rather awkwardly.

"Seriously, what are you doing, Hikaru!? It's too dangerous!"
Her face blushing, Aoi immediately ran over.
Asai however continued to look on with a coy expression unfitting of a child.
Shungo managed to reach that girl faster than Aoi, and helped her carry the fertilizer bag.
The girl turned towards Shungo, and her large eyes grew larger. The eyes and hair were light brown in color, and from close up, they were so pretty he was infatuated with it.
Shungo felt his heart pound like crazy.
"This is too heavy for a girl. Let me carry this."
"Big Brother…"
Shungo's sudden appearance caused Aoi to be shocked, and then, once she saw Shungo help carry that bag from behind the child, she immediately pouted unhappily.
Shungo wondered that Aoi must have been jealous after seeing him treat another girl so nicely. Aoi was a child, so this was to be expected.
Though he was just a year older than Aoi, this was the conclusion he came to.
"Erm, are you Miss Aoi's big brother…? I am not a girl though."
A sweet, cute voice that matched the appearance came from close range.
(Huh!?)
This time, Shungo was the one flabbergasted as his eyes widened in surprise, his mouth ajar.
"I am a boy."
The child said with an angelic voice.
(A boy!!!?)
Shungo felt cheated, and unhappily moved the fertilizer to the flowers.
"Thank you." The boy thanked him in a very cutesy manner, but he did not answer or look at the latter as he hurried back into the house.

Shungo’s second meeting with that child was during the New Year party hide at the Mikados'.
He overheard his 3 older sisters, who were natural chatterboxes,
"Look! That's the 'child who should not have been born'!"
He turned around, and found 'him', dressed in a child-sized suit and shorts.
That child was surrounded by a group of lavishly dressed big sisters, and then responded to them with an earnest, cute smile. They too started chatting with him with grins on their faces.
Shungo's sisters' interest in watching commotion was brazenly shown in this case.
"Eh? That child is 'Hikaru'? That cannot be! He looks really cute."
"It is because he is brought to the Mikados main family that Kazuaki and his mother had to leave as a result."
"So he is the heir to the Mikado family? He really is 'a child that should not have been born'."

"But he is really cute, and his hair color is pretty too! He is like a foreign prince. I want to go over and talk to him!"
"Are you not blind? B-But, I think...I may have some interest."
Shungo paid attention to their gossip.
In the past, when he eavesdropped on the adults, he learned of the existence of a 'child that should not have been born'.
Whenever the adults talked about it, all of them would frown and grumble.
(So the one I met at the Saotomes was Hikaru Mikado...)
From the attitudes of the adults, Shungo had assumed Hikaru was a gloomy child, and did not expect the latter to be so carefree, dazzling, to a point where he was practically engulfed in light. He could have enjoyable talks with women, old enough to be his mother, or women that were even older, and gain their doting love.
Right. If he were wise, he would definitely be unable to smile so carefreely.
Upon seeing that pretty face that was like a guy, Shungo suddenly recalled the awkward incident involving him at the Saotomes, and suddenly felt bitter.
The first person he ever felt his heart flutter towards was a boy...and it was to Hikaru Mikado of all people.
(That might be my first love...no, that is definitely not it! I am just mistaken! That cannot count!)
*Good thing I found out about his gender soon after...*Shungo secretly heaved a sigh of relief deep within.

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Because of these past incidents, Shungo never liked Hikaru afterwards, but because of their family standings, he could not ignore the latter, and this infuriated him.
For generations, the Tōjō had served the Mikados. Shungo was furious as he thought it was a misfortune how that lecherous, frivolous harem prince would become his future superior.

(But I never expected Hikaru to die at such a young age...)

And Shungo never thought there would be a day he would be so agitated after Hikaru died...
On a certain holiday, Shungo was in the family kitchen, preparing some breakfast though it was a little late. He strained the lettuce leaves that were to be used for the salad as he pondered.
On the day before Hikaru died, he promised Shungo he would break Yū Kanai free from her past demons, and walk out of that tattered apartment.
After that, Hikaru's friend, Koremitsu Akagi finished his wish and completed the promise.
It was great if Yū could continue enjoying her new life in Australia cheerfully.

The girl who ate lunch alone in the serene bamboo forest, her face filled with blissfulness.
Shungo really liked her silence and her shy attitude.
Shungo's taste was in females that were obedient, quiet and supple, for he had several vicious talkative older sisters who were frivolous, and would treat their little brother as a servant.
During the Heian Era, the Crown Prince that later became the Emperor Sanjō ordered his concubine Suishi to hold onto a block of ice, and said to her, "If you really loved me, you mustn't let go of the ice until I say to stop." He then forgot about it, and by the time he recalled, the ice had melted, and Suishi's hands were frozen purple. But she held on to this ice block silently, and never grumbled a single word.
If Shungo had dared to say, "This is the ideal woman", he would be lambasted to high heavens by all the women in the world, and his sisters would definitely beat him up good.
Even so, he could not help but find himself infatuated with abnormally docile females.
Unfortunately, such women normally would not dare to approach Shungo, and would run away before they even got acquainted.
Considering how there would be three potential sister-in-laws that would be hard to get along, his future in attaining a wife would be tumultuous, to say the least.
Even if he could find someone he could fall in love with, she might faint after seeing those sisters of him glare at her if she were that serene and introverted, let alone chat...there would never be a good outcome for him.
But speaking of which, the Concubine Suishi did have the casanova Minamoto no Yorisada wooing her, and it was a fact that they became husband and wife, and even conceived a child together…
When he heard of how Hikaru often visited Yū's apartment, he was furious and deflated within, dejected to a point where his gut hurt.
(I should not thank Hikaru after all...maybe it is because of his regular visits that Yū Kanai was unwilling to step out of her house. And he has countless relationships with so many girls...humpt, that person's heinous acts are unmeasurable.)
As he furiously shaved the red carrot...

"Big Brother Shungo!"

A pretty girl with long flowing black hair and a white sash tied upon it came running in with her cheeks puffed.
That would be his cousin Aoi.
Aoi had just celebrated her 17th birthday, and there was a trace of mature charm in her innocent nature as she had become prettier than before.
But in Shungo's eyes, Aoi would always be a cute cousin to him.

As the youngest child, he was oppressed by his three sisters, and thus, he doted on Aoi like she was his own little sister. The person who was born to be a part of the board of management must definitely not be like Hikaru, for he would be frowned upon by his subordinates. However, he was always amicable and caring to Aoi.
"Good morning, Aoi. Why did you look for me? What happened? Ah, I just baked some Quiches here. It's chicken and herb flavor, your favorite. There is still some Compote in the fridge too."
Shungo's interest was cooking, and he was very detailed in the ingredients he used. Naturally, he had confidence in the flavor.
However…
"That isn't important!"
Aoi refused readily, surprising him somewhat.
"Seriously, everyone is so mean! They actually said Mr Akagi is more savage than a vengeful spirit, and said he even beat it down until it submitted, and devoured it fully! Asa even said, *"It will be great if that sort of man better head off to a country full of vengeful spirits and stay there forever*". That was really cold of her!"
Aoi complained furiously.
It seemed she was angry about how Koremitsu Akagi's reputation in school had been freefalling…
"Everyone is so mean with their words; Mr Akagi will definitely be hurt if he hears that. He really is too pitiful, and Asa even added on to the wounds by saying *"What a pity. If that person is so sensitive to this, he would have been embarrassed enough to lock himself in and never come to school."* No matter how much she hates Mr Akagi, there is no need for her to be so cruel in her words! I do not want to talk to her about Mr Akagi again! Big Brother, can you please help Mr Akagi somehow?"
She was huffing in fury as she stared at Shungo with a sincere expression.
It was because Asai, whom Aoi always relied on, would not help, that she chose to look for Shungo.
Asai grew up together with Aoi, and was her good friend and guardian. It was unexpected to see the gentle and obedient Aoi not listen to Asai's words, and because of Koremitsu Akai…
Aoi and Hikaru were once betrothed.
Whenever that playboy Hikaru, who had countless girlfriends, was mentioned,
"Daddy and the rest all decided on the marriage. I really hate Hikaru!"
Aoi would insist, but everyone who knew Aoi well could tell she really liked Hikaru ever since young. This was also one of the reasons why Shungo was unable to get along with Hikaru.
After Hikaru died, Aoi lashed out at his funerary photo, and created yet a ruckus, which really worried Shungo. However, it seemed she was a lot more emotionally stable recently, and she started to smile.

She also was on better terms with the arts club members, who she once disputed with.
Also, she never relied on Asai's influence to do this; she did all of this through her own efforts.
As for the reason why Aoi became so optimistic…

—Mr Akagi helped Hikaru present a present to her.

Aoi answered shyly with a gentle smile.
So that person not only changed Yū, but Aoi too?
Shungo had complicated thoughts regarding Koremitsu Akagi; though he marveled at the latter's attitude, he was not willing to recognize it. Besides, who was he exactly?
His family background and upbringing were completely different from Hikaru's, and their personalities were miles apart. How did he end up being Hikaru's friend?
How much of *Hikaru's matters* did he know about?
Aoi's voice however dragged Shungo back from his deep thoughts.
"Big Brother, please listen to me, okay? Mr Akagi looks scary on the outside, is very crude when talking, and looks prone to violence, but he is really a good person. When we went to the theme park…"
Aoi recalled about something, and her face suddenly reddened.
Suddenly, Shungo felt an ominous premonition in his chest.
"Why are you so worried about Akagi? Have you fallen for him?"
He tried to probe by asking nonchalantly.
However, Aoi immediately blushed, unable to say anything.
Her stare floated around continuously, her hands were pressed on her blushing cheeks, she was panicking, and then, she lowered her head,
"…Not...at all."
She answered with a teeny-weeny voice.
And then, she raised her blushing petite face and insisted,
"But Mr Akagi is really a nice person! And he is Hikaru's friend! Because he really took care of me, I want to repay him somehow…so-so, I-I-I definitely, definitely, definitely do not like him!"

(THIS IS BAD!!!)

Shungo's face paled, and it seemed this ominous premonition became reality.
(Aoi, you must not! This Big Brother will definitely not agree to this!)
He hollered out deep in his heart like a foolish big brother doting on his little sister.
No, Aoi just had not recovered from the shock over Hikaru's death yet. She is just lost, unable to comprehend the situation, because she has been pampered since young, never met such a savage person, and suffered quite a culture shock.

Right! That is definitely not love!

Author's Notes

Hello everyone, this is Mizuki Nomura! Thank you for purchasing “When Hikaru was on Earth……Volume 2”! As foretold in the foreword, the theme for the second volume would be “Yugao”.
Though Yugao in the original story of the “Tale of Genji” was struck down with misfortune, she was a gentle and cute woman, and one cannot help but feel a fuzzy warmth in the heart.
Speaking of the Yugao mentioned in the main story, the “Gourd flower”, I still could not decide if I should change it to the “Moonflower”, for there are some who call it Yugao. Also, the appearance of the Moonflower is full of intrigue, so I guess it should be more suitable…the real Yugao however is of the gourd subspecies, and perhaps because of this, I could not help but think of terms like boiled vegetables and kimchi…(tears).
However, the Moonflower was introduced in Japan only during the Meiji Era, and there was no such flower during the Heian Era. The flower mentioned in the “Tale of Genji” must have been the Gourd flower, so looking at this, I suppose it would be better to stick to the original…the Gourd flower is white and fluffy. It is cute, and the charm of Yugao as a woman was not that of a high class noble, but rather, like someone of the middle class…
And so, after much deliberation, I chose the Gourd version instead. During the preview at the end of the first volume, I listed it as the Moonflower because that was what I planned in my draft. I do apologize for the change later on, Miss Takeoka. On a side note, the Hollyhock mentioned in the first volume should be the Twin-Leafed Hollyhock, but the leaves are too plan, so I decided to use the Hollyhock instead.
There are many mentions of plants in “When Hikaru was on the Earth……”, and it was really difficult to write. Even when checking the pictures, I often found myself wondering, “Eh? Oh my? What kind of flower is this?” Also, I often had to head to the botanical garden, observe them seriously, record where I saw these flowers, at where, and this flower and that flower.
The Koishikawa Botanical Gardens and the Shinjuku Gyeon are more suitable for strolling, but the Akatsuka Botanical Garden in Itabashi was a good place few know of. The park is not back, but there are many explanatory signboards, and there is even a teaching area in the park. No matter how many questions I had, the workers would try their best to explain. I had to climb a slope if I had to get there from the train station,

and I was sweating all over when walking in the summer, but I guess it must have been very useful for slimming.
Oh yes. There are two ellipsis at the back of the title “When Hikaru is on the Earth…”. Not one, but two. This is a very———————important thing to take note of, so when writing the name of this series, please do not write with one ellipsis only, and write the title with two ellipsis.
Well…as for the reason why this is important, it is similar to how the “Book Girl” series has the double quotation marks, and the “Rabbit Love” series has the Japanese period on it…it is embarrassing to explain the reason like this, but it is because the number of strokes make it more auspicious.
I am really sorry for coming up with such a stupid reason! Actually, I was just randomly checking the number of strokes, and was horrified to find terms like destruction, suffering, quagmire, darkness, frustration.
Because of this, I learned not to check on the number of strokes in the characters without a good reason, so for the currently web-serialized “Dress~” series, I am not going to check on it no matter what. However, I still want to find some auspicious words for the characters’ names. There is a website that lists a name with the suitable strokes once I enter the last name, and that is really a blessing to me. I can also create a name, and then adjust the number of strokes.

Now then, I shall report on some things.
The series “I’m a Royal Tutor in My Sister’s Dress” is currently edited into a manga and serialized on the AIR RAID online manga website. Miss Sakurana Haru is in charge of illustrator, and is known for her very attractive artwork with cute expressions, so please check it out. The first volume of Miss Rito Tousaka’s “Book Girl and the Famished Spirit” will be released on August 22nd! Ryuuto and Hotaru are really drawn fantastically! The 4 panel comic strip added on are very cute too, so please check them out.

2巻です。
このままじゃ浴きたいヒトが
続々と……

The sub-theme of the next volume “When Hikaru is on The Earth” is “Waka Murasaki”. How would little Murasaki, the most distinguished loli of the Heian Era, look like under Miss Takeoka’s pen? I am personally looking forward to it. And so, that is all for now! See you at the end of the year.
July 17th, 2011.
Mizuki Nomura

Notes

1. ↑ Actual name of cat is □□□, little Lapis Lazuli, a deep blue precious stone.
2. ↑ □□□□□, translated as 'Collection of Japanese Poems (Wakas) of Ancient and Modern Times, is an anthology of poems commissioned by Emperor Uda. Ki no Tsurayuki was an imperial poet who led the compilation. Poems used are found here: http://www.milord-club.com/Kokin/index.htm.
3. ↑ Hirohiko Takada (2009). Kokin Wakashū New Edition. Japan: Kadokawa Liberal Arts Publishing. Printed on June 25
4. ↑ Original source: Waka number 481, written by Ōshikōchi no Mitsune, one of the 4 commissioned to form the anthology
5. ↑ Original source: Waka number 665, written by Kiyohara no Fukayabu

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